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ABSTRACT

This report provides an analysis of a 2-year study of 12 urban public schools in Canada. The purpose of the study was to examine the inner workings of secondary schools in low-income settings that create high achievement for their students. The schools were selected on the basis of their achievement on provincial, school-leaving examinations and their socioeconomic status, which was based on parental income and education. The sample included both high- and low-achieving schools to identify the factors that appeared to contribute to, or inhibit, student success. The report begins with an overview of the study and a brief synopsis of recent school-effectiveness and school-improvement literature. The characteristics of the schools and a brief portrait of each school are provided, followed by an analysis of the patterns and behaviors found in the sample. Case studies were prepared that used a qualitative method and a common framework. The findings show that each school was trying to adapt to rapidly changing environments. The common elements of success found among the schools were positive attitudes and high expectations, strong and vigilant administration, a focus on academic achievement, and recognition of the need to be accountable for performance. (Contains 27 references.) (RJM)

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Schools That Make a Difference: Final Report

Twelve Canadian Secondary Schools in Low-Income Settings

by
Norman Henchey

with Muriel Dunnigan, Alex Gardner, Claude Lessard
Neal Muhtadi, Helen Raham, and Claudio Violato

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Schools that make a difference

November 2001
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The Society is an independent non-profit Canadian education research agency founded in 1996. The mission of the Society is to encourage excellence in public education through the provision of rigorous, non-partisan and arms-length research on school change and quality issues. The Society is particularly interested in assisting research that may shed insight on innovative school practices leading to successful learning outcomes. With generous assistance from seven Canadian foundations, the Society has commissioned 12 research studies to date on schooling practices in Canada. The Society is a registered Canadian charity and may provide official tax receipts for donations to its research work.

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Research into practical issues such as schooling...is helpful in showing which of the abundance of good ideas available are related [illegible] successful outcomes.

Rutter, et al. (1979). Fifteen Thousand Hours: Secondary Schools and their Effects on Children

Executive Summary

INTRODUCTION

This report is the analysis of a two-year study of twelve urban public schools in BC, Alberta and Quebec. The purpose of the study was to examine the inner workings of secondary schools in low-income settings that create high achievement for their students. The schools were selected on the basis of their achievement on provincial school-leaving examinations and their socio-economic status based on parental income and education. The sample included both high and low-achieving schools in order to identify the factors which appeared to contribute to or inhibit student success. The schools were very diverse, ranging in size from 540 to 2,000 students, and collectively they enrolled nearly 16,000 students. Using qualitative methods and a common framework, the research teams prepared case studies to illustrate performance-related practices within the schools. The case studies, contained in a separate volume, provide a rich portrait of each school.

OVERVIEW

This final report begins with an overview of the study and a brief synopsis of recent school effectiveness and improvement literature. The characteristics of the set of schools and a brief portrait of each school are provided in Chapters 3 and 4. This is followed by an analysis of the patterns and behaviors found in the sample. Chapter 6 offers broader reflections on some of the perplexing challenges confronting contemporary schools in preparing all young citizens for successful participation in the global economy and democratic society. The implications of the findings are explored in the final chapter and a set of recommendations provided for policy makers and practitioners.

FINDINGS

Each school was attempting to adapt to a rapidly changing, increasingly challenging environment. Far from being static institutions, the schools were situated along a continuum of effectiveness and efforts to improve. They had many definitions of success and some were more effective in one dimension than another. The elements commonly associated with success were:

- Positive attitudes and high expectations
- Strong and vigilant administration
- Focus on academic achievement and other indicators of success and student needs
- Recognition of the need to be accountable for performance, and to be innovative if the future of the school is to be assured

- Regular analysis of results, and linkage of results to school planning and activities
- Integrated planning and coordination of efforts to improve performance
- Importance placed on good teaching and professional development
- Sense of engagement and belonging among teachers and students and commitment to the basic mission and core values of the school
- Respectful, secure school climate and warm relationships
- Initiatives to motivate students and make learning relevant
- Structured classroom instruction and "traditional" standards of behavior
- Assistance and support for both students and teachers
- Variety and flexibility of structures, programs and services.

The practices in the successful schools in this Canadian sample generally affirm the principles of school effectiveness found in the body of international research literature.

OBSERVATIONS

The role of the secondary school is especially important for students from low-income environments. The case studies confirm schools can reduce social inequalities by stressing clear expectations and supportive structures and services.

Their elements of their success are similar to those found in the research literature: a positive climate of order and security, active leadership, collaboration among teachers, supporting programs and services, high expectations for performance, behavior and achievement for all students, warm personal relationships between educators and students and a wide range of learning opportunities and resources for all students. Schools appear to falter when one of these elements is missing or threatened.

A significant indicator of the efficacy of these schools is the degree to which they are able to motivate their students, adapt services and programs to attract new clientele, provide secure learning environments, link context and community, and create harmony amidst diversity.

Educators in these schools seem to require special qualities, as many of their students come from homes on the margins of Canadian society. Educators must assume some parenting responsibilities, extend special efforts to reach these students both emotionally and intellectually, and be highly imaginative in the selection of content and teaching approaches.

High expectations coupled with support and warm relationships are especially effective in schools serving at-risk populations. For these students, the school makes a significant difference.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The report presents the following recommendations to policy makers and practitioners:

1. Success for all students

Governments, school districts, teachers' unions and school communities should commit to the goal of success for all students in obtaining a secondary education diploma or equivalent.

2. Relevance of learning

Schools should make serious efforts to improve the relevance of learning and demonstrate this to all students, especially those from poor and marginalized backgrounds that may not value secondary education.

3. Leadership in the institution

Principals should see their primary responsibility as fostering leadership beyond their office, in the teaching staff and students.

4. Areas of excellence

Every school needs areas of excellence, sources of special pride and achievement, that will revitalize other facets of the school.

5. Balance of learning opportunities

Schools must offer a range of courses, programs, activities and services to provide at-risk students with a balance between challenge and ability, between academic and career programs, and between theory and practical experience.

6. Integration of effort

In order to be successful and effective, schools must have unity of purpose combined with a unity of effort, linking knowledge, data, analysis, planning, expectations, results, processes, support, resources and implementation.

7. Teachers as professionals

Schools need the freedom to analyze their needs, intelligently select and assign their teachers, establish professional development priorities, guarantee that teachers are available to students, and provide them with the support they need to do their job.

8. Extensions beyond the school

Schools have the responsibility to extend themselves by providing expanded learning opportunities through information technology and involvement in the community.

About The Authors

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Chapter 1
Introduction

BACKGROUND

In 1999, the Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education (SAEE), with funding from the Max Bell Foundation, commissioned a Canadian study to compare high and low-achieving secondary schools serving students in low socio-economic status (SES) areas. The purpose was to identify any differences in their practices and characteristics. In this report, the expression "low income" is generally used instead "low socio-economic" because it more accurately describes the communities studied.

Twelve secondary schools were selected in three Canadian provinces: Quebec, Alberta and British Columbia. The selection was based on total family income as a measure of SES and average marks in provincial school-leaving examinations as a measure of academic achievement. Researchers studied the schools during the school year 2000-2001 and prepared case studies for each school. This final report attempts to identify patterns across schools that seemed to contribute to student success.

It is hoped that the findings may provide guidance to Canadian educators and policy makers in developing and implementing practices that have a positive effect upon our at-risk student populations.

QUESTIONS

The following questions were asked:

1. Are there common characteristics of low-income schools?
2. What characteristics and activities distinguish successful low-income schools from less successful low-income schools?
3. What are the implications for policy and practice?

The original design was to select three high-performing schools and one low-performing school in each province in order to address the second question. However, because of limitations of selection and the evolution of schools selected during the course of the study, it was not possible to preserve a simple dichotomy between high-performing and low-performing schools. As a result, the emphasis shifted to factors which seemed to contribute to or inhibit student success in low-income schools.

ISSUES

Student Achievement

A major preoccupation of education systems is the quality of student learning – what they learn, how much they learn, how well they learn, how efficiently they learn, and how they are able to use their learning for further study, careers, and adult life. Achievement levels are often identified in terms of number of years of schooling, rate of dropping out prior to secondary school graduation, achievement in standardized tests, and rate of transition to post-secondary studies. In the knowledge society, the future quality of life for most people depends on the quality of their educational experiences and on their attitudes and skills of lifelong learning.

Challenge of Low-Income Environments

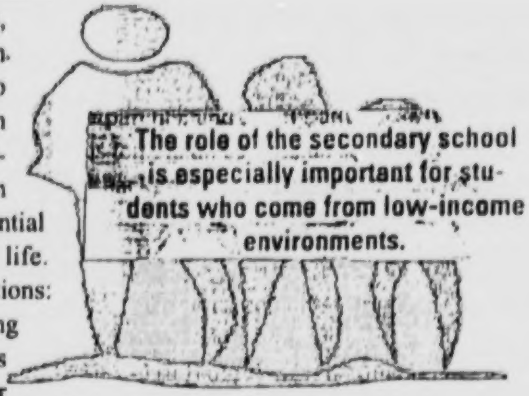
The learning achievement of a student is influenced by the socio-economic background of the learner, by such elements as family income, education of the parents, and family attitudes. As a generalization, schools with students from high-income homes tend to do better than schools with students from low-income homes. It is also true that family background need not be the major determinant of a young person's success.

Role of the Secondary School

The secondary school plays a crucial role in the education system: it serves students during the often turbulent period of adolescence, it acts as a bridge between basic education and advanced studies, and it is involved in guiding students, and in some cases classifying them, in ways that have an important influence on their further educational and career chances. The role of the secondary school is especially important for students who come from low-income environments since the school may need to compensate for negative environmental influences outside the school, raise their expectations for their future, and provide services to students that may not be necessary in more affluent environments.

School Effectiveness

There is a large body of research and reflection on the meaning of a good school, the nature of school effectiveness, the features which distinguish a successful school from an unsuccessful one, and the factors which appear to lead to effectiveness and success. People often mean different things by the expressions *good school, successful school,* and *effective school,* yet the common objective is for all students to learn, to realize their potential and to prepare themselves for a fulfilling adult life. Identifying successful schools involves three questions: How good are the school's goals and priorities according to some set of standards and criteria? To what extent is the school achieving these goals? Does the school foster high achievement and progress for all its students?



The role of the secondary school is especially important for students who come from low-income environments.

Measuring School Effectiveness and Success

There are two general approaches to studying schools, identifying success and analyzing the role of different factors which contribute to success. The first is sociological and quantitative and involves collecting data on achievement (usually relying on scores in standardized tests, attitude surveys, and statistical analysis) and studying the school as a complex institution of structures and functions. The second approach is anthropological (or ethnographic) and qualitative, and involves collecting insights from a variety of sources about multiple meanings of achievement and success and examining the school as a culture of expectations, norms, roles and relationships. Some studies attempt to use both approaches and one can complement the other.

Factors Affecting School Success

The important question for policy and practice is this: Are there some school practices which promote success and others which impede it? Why are some practices successful? Are some factors only successful when they work in combination with other factors? What is the relative importance of structures and organizational patterns? People and relationships? School climate or ethos and specific techniques and procedures? To what extent can policies and practices that appear successful in one school situation be transferred to other schools and other situations?

APPROACH

The study used both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative procedures were used to determine the selection of schools in terms of academic achievement and socio-economic status. Three provinces were selected because they had common government examinations at the end of secondary school (Grade 12 in British Columbia and Alberta, Grade 11 in Quebec) and data on school performance were available. Academic achievement of a school was defined in terms of average marks of all provincial examinations written. The socio-economic status of a school was defined in terms of total family income from all sources, based on postal codes of students enrolled linked to data from the 1996 census, the most recent information available.

A number of urban schools were identified in each province which met the criteria of low-income status and either high or low achievement. Twelve schools were selected, taking into consideration other factors such as the special situation of the school and the willingness of the school district and school to participate in the project.

Once selected, the schools were studied using a case study method involving visits, observations, interviews, focus groups and analysis of documents. Case studies were prepared for each school using a common structure and cross-case analysis attempted to discern patterns and trends among schools which seemed to contribute to success or which seemed to inhibit it.

The study has not attempted to compare schools from different provinces because of differences in education structure and provincial testing. While we can learn from the different school experiences, readers should be cautious about making comparisons.

Further information can be found in the Appendix and in the report on site selection[1] for the study (Violato, 2000).

---

1. Violato, Claudio (2000) *Report on School Selection: Schools That Make a Difference*. Kelowna, BC. Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education.

Chapter 2
Literature

As part of this project, a literature review was prepared by Dr. Terry Wendel[2]. It surveyed the recent international research literature related to the effect of socio-economic status on student achievement, school effectiveness, and the links between school effectiveness and school improvement. This chapter is based mainly on this literature review.

EFFECT OF SES ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

It has long been recognized that there are a number of factors which affect student academic achievement. These include hereditary factors such as intelligence, home environment, parental attitudes, degree of wealth and poverty, health, cultural background, learning opportunities, school services and resources, and personal motivation and application.

Which factors are most significant? Among different factors, how important is the school? Is there a single answer to these questions or does the relative importance of schooling and home, for instance, depend on circumstances?

There have been three broad responses to the question: How important is the school?

The first is the optimistic view that the school can make a major contribution, even a decisive one, to the academic achievement of students. This has been the ideology of the American public school, the general view of educators, and the assumption behind the development of policies related to schooling as investment in human resource development and the provision of publicly funded schooling to the entire population. This view sees the school as providing all young people with basic skills of literacy and numeracy, a broad general education necessary for citizenship, a set of values that will help them function in society, and a preparation for the world of work. Schools should provide all individuals with equality of social and economic opportunity as well as ensure the economic development of the society.

The second is a pessimistic view that the family background and social class of the student are more significant determinants of academic achievement than school. This view was presented in two influential American reports, James Coleman's *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (1968) and Christopher Jencks' *Inequality* (1972). These and other studies looking at the input and output of schools suggested that the characteristics of entering students were the main factor in determining the level of academic achievement; other factors such as school policies and practices, resources and teacher characteristics were either secondary or irrelevant. This seemed to suggest that initiatives to promote greater social and economic equality in society would have to be directed outside the school in the broader social environment.

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[2] Wendel, Terrence. (2000). Creating Equity and Quality: *A Literature Review of School Effectiveness and School Improvement*. Kelowna, BC. SAEE

Criticism of the assumptions and structure of these input-output studies of school drew attention to the nature and allocation of resources within a school and the estimation of family background influence. This led to further and more precise studies of school structures and procedures and the way students interact with school services and resources (Bossert, 1988).

A third approach to the question emerged in a body of research on school effectiveness which studied why some schools are more effective than others in promoting student achievement in a variety of areas. One of the first major studies using this approach was by Rutter and his associates in England in 1979. Rutter found significant differences among secondary schools in outcomes related to examinations, delinquency rates and school behavior and that the overall climate of the school was an influential factor (Rutter, 1979). Subsequent research studies have attempted to separate family background from school effects and to concentrate on what an effective school looks like and on how at-risk students can be more effectively engaged by schools (Schonert-Reichl, 2000; Kovacs, 1998).

RECENT RESEARCH ON SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS

In recent years there have been a variety of approaches to the study of school effectiveness. Some examples are:

- OECD international indicators of education in three major areas: educational programs and processes, demographic and economic background; educational outcomes (Scheerens, 1995)
- Case studies of exemplary Canadian secondary schools, sponsored by the Canadian Education Association and the Department of Human Resource Development looking at school success from an ethnographic perspective of school culture (Gaskell, 1995)
- Sergiovanni's distinction between school effectiveness (based largely on results in achievement tests) and school success (including broader but less tangible goals and processes) (Sergiovanni, 1995)
- Lists of characteristics, qualities and factors related to effective schools, teaching and classroom activities, importance of the role of administrators, distinction between effective and ineffective schools, comprehensive models of effectiveness, and school ineffectiveness (Cawelti, 1994; Wimpleberg, Teddlie and Stringfield, 1989; Creemers, 1996; Levine and Lazotte, 1990)
- Three views of school effects on achievement: (1) up to 50% of achievement based on school and classroom effects (Victorian Accountability Framework, 1998b); (2) 25% of variance coming from school factors (Kovacs, 1998); (3) 8%-14% coming from school factors (Stoll and Fink, 1996)

- Value-added achievement based on longitudinal studies showing the major contribution of a school to student progress is the effectiveness of individual classroom teachers (Stoll and Fink, 1996; Sammons, Thomas and Mortimer (1997); Pipho, 1998)

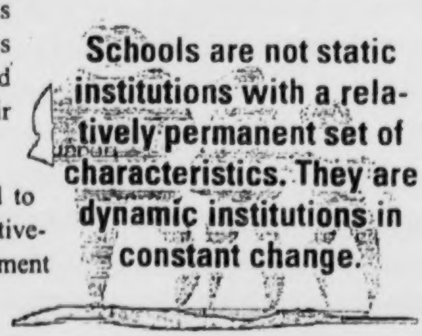
These recent research studies underline a number of points:

1. Stress on value-added concepts and equity of opportunity for all students
2. School failure not the mirror opposite of school success
3. Broader concepts of success, progress, context and district support
4. Importance of client knowledge and satisfaction
5. Need for schools to tackle those areas over which they have most control (e.g., culture, leadership, classroom practices)
6. Importance of consistency in the quality of instruction and curriculum, grouping and teacher behavior in relation to school mission
7. Accountability based on how much difference the school has made to its students
8. Critical importance of teachers.

LINKING SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS & SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Schools are not static institutions with a relatively permanent set of characteristics. They are dynamic institutions in constant change; they respond to changes in their communities and enrolment patterns; they react to the arrival of new personnel, administrators and teachers; they adapt to changing regulations and expectations from school districts and provincial departments of education; they react to crises and traumatic events; they cope with changing financial and human resources; and they evolve as their vision of their future shifts, dims, or comes more clearly into focus.

School effectiveness or school success needs to be linked to efforts at school reform and school improvement. The effectiveness literature offers four principles to guide improvement efforts:



Schools are not static institutions with a relatively permanent set of characteristics. They are dynamic institutions in constant change.

1. All students can learn under appropriate conditions.
2. School effectiveness depends on the equitable distribution of learning outcomes across the whole student population (for example, higher order outcomes should not be restricted to select students).
3. Effective schools take responsibility for students' learning outcomes, rather than blaming students and their environments.
4. The more consistent teaching and learning processes are within the school, the more effective it will be (Jacka, 1999).

Examples of School Improvement: The State-Generated Approach

In Australia, the State of Victoria has focused on accountability as a method of improving school performance. It established an accountability framework which included school-based management, budget control, staff selection, identification of curricula and standards of achievement, and quality assurance through annual reports and three-year formal reviews. In short, schools were expected to manage for results.

Five broad indicators have been selected based on the effective schools literature: school leadership, instructional focus, orderly and safe climate, high expectations of achievement for all students, consistent and regular use of student achievement measures to measure program effectiveness. Specific indicators have been developed in the key areas of curriculum, environment, accountability, management and resources.

Among the list of initial results[3] are:

1. Shift in goals toward improved outcomes
2. Willingness to set higher expectations and specific targets
3. Monitoring and assessment more important
4. Shift to fewer, more clearly defined outcome-based priorities
5. Whole school approach to improvement
6. Importance of beliefs and school culture
7. Identification of improvement needs and strategies through analysis of performance
8. Use of standards to refer to level of difficulty and learning acquired
9. High standards in terms of challenging courses and extended learning
10. High standards in terms of high levels of skill and knowledge at graduation
11. Evaluation reviews which focus on curriculum, environment, management and resourcing
12. Targeted interventions to improve the "trailing edge in student achievement".

Examples of School Improvement: The School-Generated Approach

The Manitoba (Canada) School Improvement Program was a funded program which began in 1991 with 22 secondary schools. Key aspects of the improvement process were a strong focus on student learning, engagement of the school community, connection to the world outside the school, use of ongoing inquiry and reflection, coherence and integration among school goals and initiatives, and building internal capacity for change.

To classify school change, the project used a typology of Stoll and Fink (1996):

Moving schools: effective and adding value
Cruising schools: effective but not necessarily adding value
Strolling schools: inadequate rate of improvement; ill-defined and conflicting aims
Struggling schools: ineffective, know it, have the will but not the skill
Sinking schools: ineffective but not prepared or able to change.

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[3] Victorian Department of Education (1998) *Improving School Efficiency: Student and School Evaluation.* p 15

Lessons from the project [4] suggest that the necessary factors for school improvement include:

1. Events that cause a sense of urgency
2. Mobilization of forces, especially teacher professional development
3. Right type and timing of intervention and support
4. Shared leadership of administrators, staff and students
5. Reflection and inquiry as essential components
6. Caring environment on behalf of students
7. Belief that all students can succeed.

CONCLUSIONS

This brief review of the contemporary literature on effectiveness and improvement suggests some general conclusions (see Figure 2-1):

Figure 2-1

SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS AND IMPROVEMENT

Socio-economic status affects the degree of academic achievement which students attain in their school program.

Researchers estimate schools can account for up to 50% of effect on student achievement.

Schools do make a difference in addressing social inequalities when:

- there are supportive, caring school environments that focus on students,
- schools emphasize individual effort for all students,
- improvement facilitates adaptive patterns of cognition, affect and behavior,
- students are engaged,
- teachers are effective.

A school is effective if it:

- promotes progress for all of its pupils,
- ensures that each pupil achieves the highest standards possible,
- enhances all aspects of pupil achievement and development,
- continues to improve from year to year.

School improvement should be based on these principles:

- all students can learn under appropriate conditions,
- school effectiveness depends on the equitable distribution of learning outcomes across the whole student population,
- effective schools take responsibility for students' learning outcomes, rather than blaming students and their environments,
- the more consistent teaching and learning processes are within the school, the more effective the school will be.

Schools are dynamic and not static institutions.

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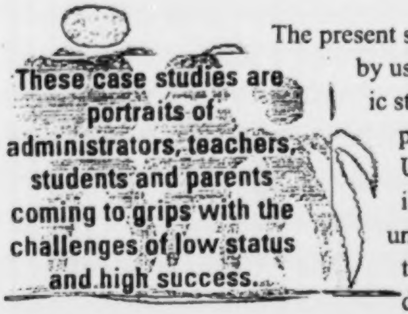
[4] Earl, Lorna M. & Linda E. Lee. (1998) *Evaluation of the Manitoba School Improvement Program*. pp.50-67.



The present study attempted to situate itself within this body of research by using quantitative test data and census data on socio-economic status to identify a set of Canadian secondary schools in three provinces which serve a low-SES or low-income population. Using qualitative methods, it has prepared case studies[5] to illustrate these schools working in different environments, under different regimes, with different conceptions of effectiveness and success, and with different indicators of the degree to which they are achieving their goals.

These case studies are portraits of administrators, teachers, students and parents coming to grips with the challenges of low status and high success.

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[5] Dunnigan , M., Gardner, A., Lessard, C., and Muhtadi, N. (2001). *Twelve Secondary Schools in Low-Income Settings.* Kelowna, BC: Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education.

Chapter 3
Set of Schools

THE SCHOOLS

The study includes four schools in Quebec, four in Alberta and four in British Columbia. The Quebec schools are all French-language schools; English is the language of instruction in the others. All are urban schools and are part of public school systems, the Quebec schools in Montreal, the Alberta schools in an urban school district, and the British Columbia schools in a number of cities in the lower mainland.

GRADE RANGE

Seven of the schools, four in Quebec and three in British Columbia, offer the complete secondary program of the province, Grades 7-11 in Quebec and Grades 8-12 in B.C. The remaining five schools, four in Alberta and one in B.C., offer only senior high Grades (Grades 10-12).

ENROLMENT

The schools vary in size from over 500 to over 2,000 (Table 3-1):

Table 3-1: Enrolment

Enrolment	Number of Schools
<1000	2
1000-1500	5
1500-2000	4
> 2000	1

CATCHMENT AREAS

All the schools have relatively open boundaries though they are required to give priority to students living within their defined catchment area. The Alberta schools have a high percentage of students from out of their territory and this is true of several of the B.C. schools. Quebec schools serve students in a defined area of Montreal, though more than one high school may draw from the same set of elementary schools. Most of the schools are in competition for students with other public schools and, in the case of Quebec, with private institutions.

ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS

All 12 schools serve students with low-income characteristics (Table 3-2), based on 1996 Census data. The indicator for economic status is total family income from all sources which co-relates highly with other measures of economic status. Family income ranged from a low of $23,669 to $53,220. Two Quebec schools had family income under $30,000; the two other Quebec schools had family incomes between $32,000 and $37,000. The Alberta schools ranged from $44,000 to $53,000 and the B.C. schools from $49,000 to $51,000.

These figures place all schools below the mean family income of the area. Quebec schools are in the lowest percentile range (7th percentile to 19th percentile); Alberta schools are divided, with two schools in the 13th and 22nd percentile and two other schools in the 42nd and 44th percentiles; B.C. schools are most closely clustered between 22nd and 30th percentiles.

Table 3-2: Census Characteristics of Schools

School	Family Income	% ile	% visible minority	% no knowledge of an official language	% single parent	Yrs. of school of parent
Que.						
1	32,634	14	33	6	37	11
2	29,311	10	43	13	32	11
3	23,669	7	25	3	50	11
4	37,651	19	49	7	33	14
Alta.						
5	44,339	13	18	3	28	13
6	45,512	22	23	3	25	13
7	52,712	42	22	3	23	14
8	53,220	44	24	1	22	14
B.C.						
9	49,970	26	37	3	28	14
10	51,817	30	55	9	14	15
11	49,720	25	75	14	18	15
12	48,521	22	39	5	19	13

Source: 1996 Census.

See Appendix for details of selection of schools. It should be noted that some of these school communities have been changing rapidly in demographic characteristics and these figures may not accurately represent current (2000-2001) school enrolment patterns.

SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS

All schools have a multicultural student population, including a substantial proportion of students coming from a range of ethnic minorities and visible minority groups (Table 3-2). According to 1996 census data, visible minorities formed over half the population in two schools, between one-third and one-half in another five schools, and between 22% and 25% in the remaining five schools. Alberta schools had the lowest proportion of visible minority students. Principals report that the multicultural and multiethnic character of the schools has increased since the time of the census. Only two schools (one in Quebec and one in British Columbia) had more than 10% of the students coming from homes with no knowledge of either official language.

All schools had important percentages of students coming from single-parent families, ranging from 14% to 50%. Quebec schools had the highest proportion, followed by Alberta and B.C. schools. Data on the number of years of schooling of the more educated parent indicate a range from 11 years in Quebec to 15 years in B.C.

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

One of the criteria for selecting schools was average mark in government examinations (Table 3-3). The original intention was to have three high-achieving schools and one low-achieving school in each province (See Appendix for details of selection).

Table 3-3: School Results in Government Examinations at Selection

School		Average	%ile
Que.	1999-2000		
1		76.4	68
2		78.0	78
3		62.3	19
4		77.1	72
Alta.	1998-1999		
5		62.4	37
6		61.4	33
7		67.8	82
8		64.8	58
B.C.	1997-1998		
9		70.0	73
10		70.1	73
11		70.4	76
12		57.9	2

Because of other factors such as the willingness of the schools to participate, the final selection deviated from the criteria in the case of School 5. The achievement records of other schools changed over the course of the study (especially School 6 and School 12). Six of the schools were above the 70th percentile (Table 3-3), four schools were below the 40th percentile, and the remaining two were at the 58th and 68th percentile levels.

Most of the school averages have remained relatively stable over the period 1995-2000 (Table 3-4). For seven schools there was no significant change and for five schools there was a statistically significant improvement.

Table 3-4: Longitudinal Achievement Scores, 1995 - 2000

School	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	Trend*
Que.							
1	59.2	71.5	72.0	67.4	76.4	76.4	up
2	69.5	75.7	77.2	70.3	77.3	78.0	up
3	52.5	65.6	69.2	62.9	65.7	62.3	no change
4	69.7	62.8	73.5	68.1	77.3	77.1	up
Alta.							
5		56.7	59.4	63.5	62.4	62.5	up
6		60.1	59.8	64.1	61.4	62.7	no change
7		67.3	65.9	67.4	67.8	67.6	no change
8		64.7	64.2	66.6	64.8	64.1	no change
B.C.							
9		65.9	68.5	70.0	69.2	71.3	up
10		69.7	72.2	70.1	72.9	71.9	no change
11		71.3	70.2	70.4	71.7	71.3	no change
12		--**	69.2	57.9	64.0	67.6	no change

**Based on trend analysis for a 5-year period at .05 level of significance. Periods 1996-2000 for Alberta and British Columbia, 1995-1999 for Quebec.*

*** No provincial test written.*

Source: Data from provincial Ministries of Education analyzed by Violato for the project.

Chapter 4
Portraits of the Schools

The following sections provide summary portraits of each of the 12 schools. The schools are grouped by province with a short introduction outlining the education context of the province. For the complete case studies, see Dunnigan et al (2001).[6]

THE SCHOOLS IN QUEBEC: CONTEXT

In recent years Quebec education has undergone major reorganization, shifting from a religious division of Catholic/Protestant school boards to a linguistic division of French/English, introducing a new curriculum beginning in elementary schools, establishing parent governing boards in each school and placing more emphasis on school-based management and accountability. Each school is required to develop a school success plan to improve achievement.

Quebec students do well in Canadian and international achievements tests (especially in literacy and mathematics), but Quebec also has one of the highest drop-out rates among Canadian provinces (35% of the age cohort), an issue of great concern to government and school boards.

Language issues have for many decades dominated educational issues in Quebec and language laws require all immigrants (with some limited exceptions) to send their children to French schools. Most immigrants who come to Quebec settle on the Montreal island. Since the 1980s, French and English schools have experienced enrolment declines and teacher surplus, but this is beginning to change. French schools are preoccupied with the quality of French and face challenges in the teaching of French not only to students whose mother tongue is not French but to the French population as well.

The education structure of Quebec differs from most other jurisdictions in North America because it has a 6-year elementary program and a 5-year secondary system (Grades 7 to 11), followed by 2-3 years at cégep (pre-university and technical colleges) and university. Most secondary schools are largely academic in nature and there are government examinations in key subjects at the end of secondary school (English, French, mathematics, history, science). About 20% of Quebec secondary students attend private schools which are subsidized at the rate of 60% of per-student cost.

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[6] Dunnigan, M., Gardner, A., Lessard, C., and Muhtadi, N. (2001) *Twelve Secondary Schools in Low-Income Settings*. Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education. Kelowna, BC.

There are two teachers' unions, one French (La Centrale des Syndicats du Québec) and one English (The Quebec Provincial Association of Teachers). Teachers' unions are powerful in Quebec and collective agreements cover most aspects of teacher selection, assignment and working conditions. Principals have little scope in the selection of teachers. In many places parents are using the powers of the Education Act to influence school policies and practices. In recent years, Quebec educational institutions at all levels have experienced major budget cuts which have caused considerable stress in the operation of schools and the quality of services.

The schools are part of a major French-language board in Montreal. Many of its schools serve low-income communities; special provincial funding is provided for such schools.

SCHOOL 1 - UNIFYING FROM CONFLICT

Our school welcomes students of all nationalities, all religions, all academic levels, the weak, the strong and the average, handicapped children and those who are independent. (Parent)

Profile

The school of 1182 students is one of six serving a district in north-central Montreal. The district has been changing in recent years, becoming poorer and more multi-ethnic as wealthier families move elsewhere. School enrolment has been declining as the school competes with the other schools in the area and with private institutions. It has many of the features of a school in a competitive environment while retaining many of the characteristics of a local school with roots in a community. Many of the students are perceived to have low self-esteem, learning problems, and social difficulties but teachers believe they can be reached and helped. An important characteristic of the school is a history of conflict between teachers and the administration of the school and between different groups of teachers. With a new principal, the conflicts have been eased, relations are more harmonious, but echoes remain. Surprisingly, despite this history, conflicts seem not to have affected the educational activities of the school in a serious way.

Climate

Teachers exhibit a dynamism and commitment in their work and are preoccupied with the problem of motivating a diverse clientele of students. They use a variety of means including a system of penalties and rewards, out-of-school activities, special programs, and projects. Teachers differ in their views of educational goals, the potential of students, and the degree to which school life should be strict and structured or flexible and open. Yet they share a commitment to promoting student success and a sense of attachment to the school which is reflected in student attitudes. A key person in promoting this common vision for a divided staff has been the educational consultant on staff.

Leadership

The leadership style of the current principal has three main features: presence, communication and participation. The principal describes herself as a "field person," someone involved in many aspects of the daily life of the school and readily available to staff and students. Dialogue and open communication have reduced tensions among staff and her efforts to involve others in decision making have improved staff confidence.

Staff

The school has limited control over staff selection but has more opportunity in the distribution of assignments. Teachers are organized not by subject departments but by year and by cycle (1-2, 3-4, 5). Teachers have moved from a culture of conflict to one of adjustment and acceptance of different opinions, still there are differences about the application of school rules and disciplinary procedures. There are also intergenerational conflicts among teachers. Despite all this, there is a high degree of stability in the teaching staff of the school and some teachers have spent a major part of their teaching career in this school.

Focus on Success and Ongoing Growth

Each year the school has an integrated system of evaluation and planning for student success. This involves a careful analysis of the examination results of the students involving (a) indicators of a problem, (b) analysis of the situation, and (c) development of a plan of action. Examples of problems analyzed: dropout rate of 41.3%; decline in the success rate in social sciences; declining reading scores. A number of initiatives for the professional development of teachers have been guided by the consultant (conseiller pédagogique) over the past seven years. These include a voluntary teaching club to discuss practice and improve methods, regular use of outside experts on constructivist teaching, integrated annual planning to meet student needs, professional days on evaluation of students, and special support structures for the integration of new teachers and supply teachers. Emphasis is also placed on the personal and cultural experiences of the school's students.

Instructional Organization, Planning and Strategies

There are five programs: 140 students in welcoming classes for those with insufficient knowledge of the language of instruction; 5-6 classes of individualized programs for students with learning difficulties of different sorts; work transition programs for students between 16 and 21 years of age; 850 students in regular academic programs grouped by academic profiles within a "house" system, the large majority of whom go on to postsecondary studies; and an enriched program called "Impact" with one class at each of the five levels of the secondary school program. The Impact program is the subject of some controversy among teachers (some consider it elitist) and its enrolments are declining due to competition among high schools for able students coming out of the elementary schools. The school offers a number of support services for students, including: a Help Centre where students assist other students with learning problems; a Mathematics Centre to help students with specific math problems; catch-up sessions in morning, noon and evening; a system of points and rewards for punctuality and assignments (if assignments are not regularly submitted, teachers do not correct examinations); special funding for supplementary personnel to help students and prevent dropping out; and a special week of activities in cooperation with social services to prevent suicide among young people. The school also has a range of cultural, social and athletic programs. Many of these activities are funded by a special program for schools in low-income areas and efforts are being made to increase student participation.

The school day is organized in 4 periods of 75 minutes each, beginning at 8:40 am and ending at 3:20 pm. Teaching and classroom organization are quite conventional. Class climate is generally calm, pleasant and cordial and expectations are clearly set out. There appear to be no divisions among students of different ethnic backgrounds. Content is dealt with in an organized fashion but there seem weaknesses in situating content in a broader context and in attention to the quality of language.

Community

Most parents like the school and many attended it themselves. They compare it favourably with the neighboring schools and private schools. Others find a contradiction between the expressed spirit of flexibility and the structure of control.

Elements of Success

1. Strong professional development orientation among teachers
2. Teaching as a priority
3. Sense of urgency regarding performance in order to recruit students
4. Regular analysis of achievement results
5. School success plan which provides coherent goals and strategies to guide improvements
6. Warm relationships and respectful climate
7. Deliberate structure in the classrooms
8. Carefully cultivated feeling of belonging
9. Belief that students can succeed and a willingness to adapt to meet their needs
10. Teachers' efforts to motivate students and link their learning to the real world.

SCHOOL 2 -AFFIRMING INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY

It's not unusual to see students still in sandals in the months of November and December or without socks in their shoes. (Teacher)

Profile

Poverty and cultural diversity are the two challenges facing this school, situated on the boundary between a working-class district and one of the poorest suburbs in Canada. Seventy-five per cent of the 1749 student body are immigrants, increasingly from India and Pakistan; they are in transition with many of the most able leaving for other parts of Canada. The enrolment also includes 50 other ethnic groups and about 15% of the students are Quebec born. The school and the district are trying to overcome a past reputation for poverty, violence and street gangs. The school pays attention to security with hall cameras and a retired police officer on staff; the school is calm, clean, with student murals on the walls and plants in many areas. Many of the students have serious personal problems and many come from homes that do not place great value on schooling; still, most of the immigrant children are well behaved and respectful of authority.

Climate

Most teachers, parents, and students agree that the school maintains high standards and expectations. Some teachers argue it is wrong to "adjust" expectations to the social and learning problems facing the students; others stress the need to establish personal relations with the students and adapt teaching approaches. For all, school success is larger than academic performance on examinations and this is reflected in a tendency for educators to speak more often of the "young people" than the "students" and to stress the responsibility of the school community to further the well-being and development of the young people. Among staff and administrators there is a spirit of collegiality and "conviviality" with little emphasis on hierarchy. Teachers and students testify to a spirit of trust and respect. The school gives the students a chance to escape for a while the limits of their environment and there is a strong sense of engagement on the part of teachers, students and parents.

Leadership

The policy of leadership rests on principles of presence, respect, individual relationships and participation. The principal often makes impromptu visits to classrooms; teachers speak not of conflict with the administration but of the support they receive. Students, teachers and parents praise the humanistic and open leadership of the administration.

Staff

The principal chooses new teachers from a list of candidates supplied by the school board, but is able to get teachers who have the attitudes and adaptability which the school needs. Teachers work in teams and stress is placed on innovative ways of adapting programs to the needs of the students. Because of budget cuts, the post of team leader has been abolished and teachers consult individually with the principal, paradoxically shifting influence from groups to individuals. There seems to be a high degree of professional collaboration among the teachers and broad agreement on academic and behavior essentials.

Focus on Success and Ongoing Growth

In final examinations in French language, the school is among the top two or three schools of the board, attributed in part to a high degree of coordination among the language teachers. Results in mathematics are less impressive and changes have been made in time allocation and programs to address the issue. The school is distinguished by a continuing re-evaluation and adjustment of programs and schedules to meet student needs. The school has close ties with the local elementary schools to help students adjust to secondary school and it makes efforts to welcome and support new teachers and interns. The adaptability of the school to student needs is both a strength and a weakness: it promotes success for students, but some believe it should do more to push students to greater performance and into courses that open more doors of future opportunity.

Instructional Organization, Planning and Strategies

One of the distinguishing features of the school is the possibility of students following courses at different levels, a policy especially suited to integrate students with limited knowledge of French into academic subjects. There are five general programs: 210 students in introductory language classes at different levels; over 1100 students in regular programs over five years (Grades 7 to 11); 275 students with learning difficulties in individualized programs; 84 students in a program for the deaf who come from the western part of Quebec; and a work-study program for a diverse group of 16-to-18 year olds who have dropped out of school, have learning problems or other difficulties. There are also a number of special programs: a strong program in visual arts, music, dance, and drama; a language follow-up program to help students with limited knowledge of French make the transition from special classes to regular ones; after-school tutoring programs in French and mathematics; sports activities such as basketball explicitly to encourage students to stay in school; a special enrichment program in basic subjects to begin officially next school year; partnerships with community organizations and industry.

Classes have a cordial, even a family-like atmosphere; procedures and expectations of behavior and work are understood by all and there is a general stress on the understanding of content and on formative evaluation. Periods are 75 minutes in length and usually involve teacher presentations and team work by students. There is frequent emphasis on the practical importance of successful work for future studies and career choice. Teaching methods are generally conventional and the teacher's role is primarily that of a dispenser of information. Not surprisingly, there are more efforts to adapt teaching and programs to students in the specialized programs (language classes, deaf, students with learning difficulties) than in regular programs where the effort is to help students meet the common standards. Teacher-student relations are cordial and informal. Students are friendly and helpful to one another and the physical setup of the school encourages mixing of groups.

Community

Parents agree with teachers that the school is successful primarily because it adapts to the needs of the students. Some worry that students may be discouraged from trying difficult courses and in general parents seem to have a more pragmatic view of the social role of a high school diploma than a more philosophical view of the social well-being of the student.

Elements of Success

1. Creative and flexible use of time to ensure successful learning (individualized timetables, additional or extended modules for difficult subjects, experimentation with the length of instructional periods, continual refining of course content and sequencing to produce better mastery of course material)

2. Coordinated planning and teamwork (departmental cooperation for planning and coordination)

3. Self-evaluation (constant examination of results, search for ways of improving, encouragement of innovation for improvement and the inherent risks they entail)

4. Orientation of professionals and students (assistance for students to help them meet social and academic needs and professional support for staff)
5. Structured classroom instruction (traditional teaching styles, careful planning, high expectations)
6. Insistance on a humanistic approach to teachers and students.

SCHOOL 3 - TOWARDS A SHARED RENEWAL

The school is too well adapted to the culture of its milieu ...The school should not reflect its environment but should reflect on its environment. (Principal)

Profile

Located in one of the poorest sections of Montreal, the school has been facing grave administrative and academic problems: a reputation for violence because of the environment, among the poorest results in government examinations, a graduation rate of 10%, five different principals in the past nine years. The secondary school has three sections (regular, special needs, work preparation programs for older students with intellectual challenges) and shares a facility with an adult vocational education section which is independent and which occupies 70% of the building. To this dichotomy are added others: between regular and special programs, and between teachers and the administration. In this situation of division there is also the continuing threat of closure which leaves the school, staff and students in a kind of limbo. The students are not only impoverished economically, but also culturally and socially. Enrolment is declining and the feeder elementary schools send only 40% of their graduates to this secondary school. Of 530 students, 177 were at least one year behind (had repeated one or more years in elementary school) when they came to the school. Staff motivation is low.

Climate

New teachers and substitute teachers report having lived through hell. Many people in the school feel a general lack of security and safety outside the school and within. The external environment is marked by intimidation, weapons, ethnic conflicts and street gangs. Yet students have a sense of belonging; it is their school and they are with their friends. Many students work part-time and the local population has been living from one generation to the next on the margins of society. At the upper grades, absenteeism and apathy are prevalent. Students see no relevance to school and tend to hold the school responsible for their problems. There is also a widespread feeling that expectations are low and there is a general lack of rigor. Students and teachers speak a different "language" and yet, taking this into consideration, most students show respect to teachers. Students speak of their relations with teachers only in interpersonal terms, not in terms of learning.

Leadership

The current principal, who taught in the school for eight years, is in the first year of a 4-year mandate to turn the situation around, improve the success rate, raise the graduation rate and change the reputation of the school. To do this he must assert his leadership and has been spending the first year observing the situation. His main challenges are the often stormy relationships between teachers in the regular program and those in the special needs sector, as well as the need to overcome the mistrust of the teachers in the regular sector. Many see the principal as not sufficiently visible and accessible. The vice-principal is assuming a role of mediator, intermediary and interpreter between principal and teachers.

Staff

The teachers of students with special needs and those in regular programs occupy two different floors of the building and in effect two enclaves that tend to be mutually exclusive. Each has its own social life, dining room and work rooms. The first group has a culture based on team work and a search for practical solutions to problems; the second group, in regular programs, has a more individualistic tradition and fewer problem solving inclinations. Many people underline this lack of cohesion in the school as a whole. Among the results of this split in staff, and of the succession of principals, are a strong union influence in the school and a feeling of resistance to change. The different groups of teachers cannot agree on a single code of conduct for all students.

Focus on Success and Ongoing Growth

The school's examination results in French, English, science and history are below the average of the school board and of other schools in the sector which serve a comparable clientele. To improve examination results, greater analysis of evaluation data must be made to measure progress and teachers need training in the area of evaluation. Many teachers comment on the lack of vision and overall strategy; some have a defeatist attitude, but the principal remains optimistic that the school is stirring from its inertia. Teachers help those students who show interest and give respect, but there is no vision of "success for all." Little attention is given to the integration of new teachers and part-time teachers into the school or to professional development.

Instructional Organization, Planning and Strategies

Of the 530 students in general education, 351 are in the regular program, 188 follow individualized programs (they have serious learning difficulties and are generally two years or more behind in their schooling), and 30 students between 16 and 21 years of age are prepared for low-skill jobs through functional academic courses and practical work experience. Funds are available for practical learning experiences like field trips and visits to cultural centres but, except for science, few teachers take advantage of these resources. Unlike some other schools, this school does not make use of sports or artistic activities to foster student engagement in the school.

The administration and staff have different views of teaching. The former stresses an accent on learning, use of projects, new and rigorous practices of evaluation, higher academic expectations, and greater participation of students in learning. The teachers give greater importance to the communication aspect of teaching and to the necessity of establishing a climate of confidence with the student before undertaking any teaching. In general, classes observed were calm and well conducted with varying degrees of attention paid to the learning task. Methods tended to be traditional and activities varied. Relations between teachers and students were respectful, easier in the senior years than in the early years because the more difficult students drop out. The students seem intellectually able but not supported by their social environment.

Community

The parents are not very involved in the school even if they support the idea of a local community school. Regular teacher-parent communication is largely limited to notes in the students' agenda book and phone calls about absences. It is not always easy for parents to get information about how their children are doing and while teachers do not refuse to meet parents, they don't go out of their way either.

Elements of Success

1. Recognition that the school is facing major academic and human relations problems and that its future is in question
2. Improving lines of communication among teacher groups
3. Attempts to create a unified vision of the school, a common philosophy and plan of action
4. Efforts by the principal to transform the learning culture of the school.

Epilogue

Following the summer of 2001, things have begun to improve. The school has been well cleaned, the principal has moved to a new office with lots of space to meet teachers. All the teachers participated in two professional development days and committed themselves to the school improvement plan that was developed during these days. The principal has applied for special status as a pilot school and for special funding to implement new teacher working arrangements.

SCHOOL 4 - CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS

> *Here, it's utopia ...What happens here is not representative, it doesn't reflect what's happening outside. (Student)*

Profile

This school is in the western part of the city of Montreal in a generally mixed-to-poor area. The vast majority of the 1566 students are immigrants while most of the French-speaking students in the district attend private schools. The school is distinguished by the dynamism of its multi-ethnic character and the exceptional results it achieves. Although parents may be economically poor they place a high value on education and social integration and, in general, the students are motivated, disciplined and respectful. Many students come from countries where there is considerable violence so some have difficulty adjusting to life here. In addition, the students are required by law to attend French schools but they commonly use English outside school, a practice of some concern to the school.

Climate

All members of the school seem to be working harmoniously and sharing a common goal and there is a high degree of social cohesion. Teachers give a good deal of time and effort to their students and expect the same work ethic from them. The teachers have to adjust to the different backgrounds and levels of competence in French of their students. This has produced a climate of innovation and flexibility in teaching styles and organization. The key elements are: (1) organization and engagement of the school team for success, (2) high expectations for students, and (3) positive student attitudes and confidence in the school staff rather than resistance to their efforts.

Leadership

The principal is the cornerstone of the school which he has directed for ten years. The leadership is rooted in order and discipline that require of the teachers a sense of rigor and reserve but also allows for close relations and dialogue. Management involves strict adherence to the regulations and to the collective agreement of the teachers. Administrators and staff respond rapidly to any problem or challenge that may threaten the order of the school.

Staff

The school has very little freedom in the choice of teachers but teachers at the school are expected to do more than their teaching tasks and must be committed to the cultural, social and athletic activities related to the school's mission. Teachers are organized by subject matter and by level and are encouraged to plan curricular and extracurricular activities in a collaborative way. Relations among teachers, between teachers and the administration and between teachers and students all focus on the central issue of student success.

Focus on Success and Ongoing Growth

There are three strategies: professional development of teachers, analysis of student performance in all subjects and structures to correct student weaknesses. Practical measures include special workshops, study groups in certain subjects such as mathematics, information technologies, training for beginning teachers, follow up in teaching methods, use of pedagogical (professional) days and involvement in external conference and experimental programs (in reading). Student results from the school board are analyzed, weaknesses identified and corrective measures taken to improve marks. Special Saturday courses are offered by outside teachers and tutorial programs are given to students with particular problems and not just to those in danger of failing.

In the Ministry examinations, the school obtained results above the average for private schools in Quebec in the area of English second language; in school board examinations, results were above average in 16 of the 18 subjects tested, including mathematics and science tests. All students who applied to college were accepted. It should also be noted that 175-180 students completed high school graduation requirements (Grade 11) out of a cohort of 300 in secondary one (Grade 7). Beyond this academic performance, the school aids the social integration of its largely immigrant and non-French speaking population.

Instructional Organization, Planning and Strategies

Although there is a general structure for secondary schools throughout Quebec, there are a number of special programs in the school. The school has the largest system of welcoming classes (to teach French) for immigrants in the school board, with 18-24 groups a year serving 300-400 new students. In addition, individualized programs and special courses serve students who have difficulties meeting the graduation requirements; regular and enriched programs serve the other students. An important element of the program is the music course which involves playing an instrument; this makes a major contribution to the school's reputation and to the students' attitude towards the school and their success, but it is limited to students in regular and enriched programs. Remedial and support services in the school are primarily directed to academic performance and not to personal problems. Student life in the school includes a large variety of activities such as jazz festivals, student council, student radio, games, sports teams, and fashion shows.

The teaching and learning activities in the classrooms, workshops and laboratories are generally formal but warm, businesslike and orderly, with high expectations and a sense of caring and mutual support, traditional in structure but open in approach. There is a preoccupation with the continuity of learning in the programs from the beginning to the end of high school. Styles vary but most teachers and students take their responsibilities seriously and parents are supportive of the work of the school. Many teachers think of themselves not only as teachers but as chemists, musicians and mathematicians; they have high expectations for the content to be communicated, the methods to be instilled and the "culture of the discipline" to be shared.

Community

Parents like the school, and they support the discipline and values of the school, partly because it resembles a private school (or the school in their countries of origin), but they want their children in the pluralistic environment of a public school where many nationalities are represented. They have high regard for the principal's blend of openness, flexibility and rigor but they are less happy with the sometimes intrusive nationalism of some of the teachers. In the view of many parents, the school is more open to cultural diversity and less prone to lax educational practices than many other public schools, yet it has a less exclusive focus on academic excellence than many private schools.

Elements of Success

1. Motivated students
2. Teachers' emphasis on perfection and educational innovations
3. Close interactions between teachers and students
4. Variety of educational structures
5. Learning assistance program for students who struggle academically
6. Strong principal, a vigilant and open administration
7. Accent on cultural development and music as a vehicle of general education.

THE SCHOOLS IN ALBERTA: CONTEXT

Alberta has a K-12 education system with most urban high schools offering Grades 10 to 12. The Ministry of Education, Alberta Learning, establishes a broad framework with well-defined, outcomes-based programs of study. There are achievement tests in Grades 3, 6 and 9 and diploma examinations in core subjects at the end of Grade 12, with two levels in each of English, mathematics and social studies. Considerable emphasis is placed on examination results at the provincial, district and school levels and annual planning reports specify results to be obtained. Schools are funded not on the basis of enrolment but on the basis of student credit count entailing both a minimum mark and attendance record.

The school district has a major focus on student achievement and carries out yearly satisfaction surveys of students, staff and parents. Although secondary schools have catchment areas, schools are encouraged to develop distinctive programs and activities and can attract students from the entire urban area. Over 60% of high school students attend schools outside their local area. The school district has long had a tradition of site-based management and budgets are decentralized in a block fund to the school where decisions can be made about staffing levels and resource allocation. Additional funds are available for innovative programs.

In Alberta, there is a high degree of alignment from goals to programs to evaluation to results to accountability; this alignment flows from ministry to school boards to schools. Achievement is largely determined by results on the Grade 12 diploma examinations and schools prepare students for success in these tests. Because of open boundaries, there is not a high degree of socio-economic differences among schools.

SCHOOL 5 - RAISING EXPECTATIONS

They tell you that you have a future. (Student)

Profile

The neighborhood is a low socio-economic one, old, quiet, residential, with small single family dwellings. What it doesn't have is very many young people. As a result, 60% of the 1168 students come from 16 junior high schools outside the area, attracted to a school with "old-fashioned" values, concern for the most appropriate placement of students, an after-hours Study Hall and with a strong attachment to a community. Parents and students are blue-collar: the school has the second-lowest family income among public schools in the city, lowest parental education, and a high percent of single-parent families. For a lot of students, success means to finish high school and go to work.

Climate

The school is clear and practical about the expectations it has for the students: good behavior, hard work, high aspirations, belief in success. A list of expectations for students is posted in every classroom, printed in program booklets and sent home to parents. There is a strong accent on academic achievement but efforts are being made to expand the recognition of success to other areas of accomplishment; there is a hall of fame of successful graduates in different walks of life. The school is vigilant in maintaining a safe environment. Teachers teach with their doors open. A Study Hall, open three times a week after school, provides supervision to students assigned to complete work or because of behavioral problems. This is a balanced "middle-of-the-road" school that gets a high satisfaction rating from both students and teachers.

Leadership

The leadership of the school is strong and respected by staff, students and parents. While the principal makes the final decisions, there are ample mechanisms of consultation including a faculty council of department heads, a student council and parent committees. There is general satisfaction with the openness of the process and the fairness in the allocation of resources.

Staff

Teaching vacancies are advertised and new teachers are selected on the recommendation of a school committee from a list of applicants. Students identify the quality of the teachers as the essential ingredient in making the school meaningful to them. Many of the teachers attended the school themselves and some have been there for many years. Teachers are required to produce an annual "personal growth plan," the principal meets with each teacher, and there is a formal performance review for new teachers. In general, teachers are expected to teach different levels of courses in their area and assignments are made by the department head in consultation with the teacher. Recently teachers have been developing new courses in such areas as writing, film, sports and fine arts.

Focus on Success and Ongoing Growth

The school gives high priority to student achievement in its school plan and it carefully analyzes examination results. Last year 55% of Grade 12 students received diplomas, up from 42% four years earlier but slightly down from the previous year. Teachers use noon hour and after school tutorials, the Study Hall, and special Saturday sessions prior to examinations to assist students. A good deal of care is taken with the placement of students in the appropriate level of basic courses. Teachers follow professional development activities in their subject areas, support is offered by the student services department to students identified as having scholarship potential and sessions are offered to students on time management and study skills. There is no longer an attitude among teachers that the "kids are not good enough," and there is an increasing acceptance among the students that it is alright to get good marks. Still, it remains a challenge for teachers to motivate students to make academic achievement a high priority in their lives.

Instructional Organization, Planning and Strategies

The school offers courses at various levels in the basic subjects, including enriched and advanced placement classes, and a wide range of programs in arts, languages, career and technology studies. In addition, there are programs for students with special needs. The daily schedule is 8:27 a.m. to 3:10 p.m. and contains five 66-minute periods. On Thursdays the day is shortened for meetings and activities. In addition to the principal, there are 3 vice-principals and 11 department heads. The department heads are responsible for the day-to-day operations of their subject area. The chief administrative body is the faculty council which consists of the principal, vice principals and department heads.

In all areas the teachers are working hard to motivate the students, to promote higher academic achievement and to improve student performance on examinations. Although different departments have different styles and different degrees of structure, teachers work collaboratively. Counsellors in the student services department work closely with the feeder schools to ensure a smooth transition from junior to senior high school. The school is well equipped with four recently upgraded computer laboratories and networked computers in each classroom, though limited use is made for teaching purposes.

Community

The local community sees the school as its own and is proud of its tradition. The school provides services for senior citizens and art students are involved in a community project to create murals on the sides of buildings in the district.

Elements of Success

1. Teachers' encouragement for students to do more than just enough to pass
2. Positive relationships and good rapport between the students and the teachers
3. "Traditional", "old fashioned" approach with emphasis on "time-honored values"
4. Teachers' efforts to make course content relevant
5. Primary focus on academic achievement
6. Broad spectrum of courses and activities to give students greater opportunities to experience success
7. Belief that the lower socio-economic background of students cannot be used as an excuse for low levels of achievement
8. School choice, resulting in close affiliation of parents and students to its mission and expectations
9. Small size of the school
10. Hiring of teachers to fit the mission and mandate of the school.

SCHOOL 6 - A NEW VITALITY

Students are a great bunch of kids – when treated the right way. They have lots working against them. I am a daytime parent. (Teacher)

Profile

This is an example of a renovated and renewing school, located next to low-cost housing and across the street from a large shopping mall. Opened in 1969 as a composite school with fine vocational workshops it later declined in numbers, focus and esteem. Recently, there has been a major renovation of the physical facilities, three principals in the past seven years, and two-thirds of the staff are new to the school in the past three years; two new programs have been introduced, one the International Baccalaureate, the other Mandarin. The reform was begun by the previous principal and is being expanded by the current principal who is in the second year of her mandate. Most of the 1500 students come from 14 junior high schools, most within the broad catchment area, and there are 63 ethnic groups represented, with students of Asian and Lebanese origins forming the largest groups. About two-thirds of the students are in regular academic and career programs and the remainder is evenly split between those taking at least one IB subject and those with special needs. The community is largely blue-collar but is increasingly diverse in socio-economic status; students from affluent homes tend to go to schools outside the school's boundaries.

Climate

Recent changes in the school were aimed at setting a more professional and productive tone. Teachers are expected to be models for their students in preparation, punctuality and attitudes; expectations have been raised for both staff and students; there is zero tolerance for major infractions of the school code; the administrators work as a highly visible and consistent team; there is a full-time resource officer (a police officer on staff); attendance has improved; more emphasis is placed on acknowledging accomplishments of staff and students through assemblies, a newsletter, letters to parents and an annual awards event. A major effort is being placed on improving student attendance through phone calls, follow up and incentives. There is an active students union that among other things encourages community activities and represents students' views in planning school activities. In general the students get along well and there are no cliques or gangs.

Leadership

The style of recent principals has been relatively "top-down" but there is broad agreement that their decisions were good for the school. The current principal is described as more open, democratic and participatory, passionate, a good listener and supportive of teachers and students.

Staff

The staff has a common vision, loyalty to the school and sense of involvement, somewhat surprising considering the recent staff turnover. Much of this unity of purpose is due to careful staff selection on the part of the principal and department heads. The principal has clear and high expectations for staff and is continuously evaluating in an informal way. There is a professional development committee in the school that makes recommendations on allocating funds.

Focus on Success and Ongoing Growth

Because of changes in the school, a clear and consistent focus on results is in the early stages of development. A great deal of attention is being paid to student achievement, in marks and in other aspects. There is more sharing of information and material among teachers and the counselling department is working hard to ensure that all students are registered in appropriate courses and programs. There are 200 special-needs students with individualized program plans. In five International Baccalaureate courses with results reported, the students were slightly below world average in four and above in one. In a district satisfaction survey, teachers expressed highest satisfaction with the focus on student achievement and students had highest satisfaction with expectations to do one's best.

Instructional Organization, Planning and Strategies

Instructional planning is done primarily at the department level. The school is organized in subject departments, each with its own area in the building. Most courses are semestered on a 4-block, 80-minute, 2-day cycle. Departments are starting to pattern tests on the structure of the diploma examinations, but there are few teachers in the school with experience in marking or item development for diploma examinations and this is an area for planned growth. The school offers a broad range of programs and an extensive co-curricular program; programs range from a community living skills program and an integrated occupational program (for students three years or more below grade level) to regular academic programs, the International Baccalaureate, 15 strands in career and technology studies (the mechanics shop is the largest in the province and the foods lab is one of the newest and best equipped), four international languages (Mandarin, Ukrainian, French, Spanish), and all the fine arts. To serve student learning needs, the school has a special needs coordinator, a learning centre to teach learning strategies, a student services and career centre, a work experience coordinator and three full-time counsellors. There is a range of course choice within key subjects such as English and students have access to over 300 computers in the school.

To improve communication with parents, the school has an open house each spring, a first-class monthly newsletter mailed to parents, a parent advisory council, encouragement for teacher-parent interviews, report cards mailed home, and regular telephone calls (there is a telephone in each classroom).

Community

The school's involvement with the community has ebbed and flowed over the years. Current links include community services from hairdressing and food programs, the newsletter sent to churches, advertisement for the Mandarin program in the Chinese newspaper, and relationships with ethnic organizations and the neighborhood shopping mall. The school has an award-winning public relations campaign and has developed good relations with the media.

Elements of Success

1. Heightened expectations for everyone, recognizing the wide range of ability
2. Principal as a catalyst for change
3. High level of accountability for staff and students
4. Recognition of the need for strong role models among both staff and students
5. Conscious effort to engage students, staff, parents, and community at the personal level, stressing the importance of building personal relationships
6. Recognition of the importance of rebuilding a sense of pride in the school.

SCHOOL 7 - PRIDE OF TRADITION

The kids here are very interested in the world around them. I wonder, is it the school that is promoting this, or is the school supporting the interests the kids bring? (Teacher)

Profile

The setting is not that of the typical urban school. Located in a relatively isolated and picturesque spot on the bank of a river with wonderful school grounds, the school's location and reputation draw its 1350 students from 28 junior high schools, with half of the enrolment coming from outside the immediate area. The school vigorously promotes its sense of tradition and its motto (*Nihil sed optimum)* and offers a range of programs: International Baccalaureate (IB), community living skills for special needs students, an autistic program, strong music and sports programs and several international languages including the first Mandarin IB program in Canada. Most parents are working class and a large number of students are of Asian descent.

Climate

The school has a robust culture with a number of features: high degree of interaction between staff and students; a lot of communication between school and parents; high expectations and frequent recognition of achievement in a variety of areas. Most students are focused, friendly and polite. The school is known as a safe and smart school, the importance of involvement in school activities is stressed and inspirational sayings are displayed in every classroom.

Leadership

Leadership in the school comes from three sources: the principal, the departments and the student council. The principal provides a clear vision for the school, a smooth management structure and a strong accountability framework. He is in every classroom at least once a week and has his finger on the pulse of staff and students. Departments play a key role in planning, teaching assignments, curriculum development, evaluation of students and the orientation of new teachers. The student union, whose membership is by application, provides strong leadership to the students even though it is perceived by some as largely composed of students from academic and IB programs.

Staff

Teachers are hired by the principal on the recommendation of an interview committee chaired by the department head. The school also uses differentiated staffing by hiring a few interns each year. Involvement in extracurricular activities and committees is not mandatory but almost all teachers take part; there is a high level of participation in professional development programs even before it became a requirement. Few teachers leave except for retirement or promotion.

Focus on Success and Ongoing Growth

The departments carefully analyze the results in the provincial examinations; attention is paid to counseling students into the appropriate level courses but students are not prevented from taking courses for which they are qualified. The IB results are above the world average and the school placed first among seven schools in the city in four of the IB subjects. Over the past five years, the percent of students receiving a high school diploma, district awards and provincial scholarships has been increasing. The school has the second best attendance record in the district. Surveys show very high staff and student satisfaction with the school, especially in such areas as focus on achievement, high expectations, safety, and good learning environment.

Instructional Organization, Planning and Strategies

Departments are organized by subject disciplines and the school operates on a 5-block day with classes 66 minutes in length; time is provided for teacher meetings. There are monthly general staff meetings, biweekly meetings of the faculty council representing departments, and regular department meetings. A good deal of counseling and follow-up is intended to assure the appropriate placement of students in the right courses and programs; students in difficulty may be offered program modification, peer tutoring, opportunities to redo tests and assignments, or attendance at "makeup achievement classes" after school.

Teaching methods are generally traditional with a balance of teacher directed activity, group work and individual work. IB classes make more use of seminars, non-academic classes are more structured. There is a high degree of collaboration among teachers in planning lessons, sharing resources and preparing examinations. Beginning in Grade 10, teachers model their examinations on the provincial examination format.. Teachers talk about learning strategies and critical thinking skills, but are also pressed to cover the material and give students the tools to do well in the examinations. Departments reflect different patterns of coordination vs. individuality, to some extent based on the culture of different disciplines like mathematics or English.

Community

The focus of the school is more directed to the student body than to community involvement. The school maintains strong relationships with the feeder junior high schools and invites residents of the community to take part in certain school activities. It also has a community relations committee and the perception of both staff and parents is that the school has a very good reputation in the community.

Elements of Success

1. Congruent expectations creating a high degree of trust among the students, parents, staff, and administration

2. High expectations for everyone, adults and students alike, and a safe environment in which to operate

3. Meaningful and healthy interaction and relationships among the various partners in the school, with teachers connecting on a human level with their students to optimize learning

4. The principal as a pivotal influence, although not always front and centre, and the development of the sense of the power of team among the students and staff
5. A strong planning process with clear vision and values driving the activities of the school and analysis of results used to drive ongoing planning and action
6. High level of accountability for everyone with comprehensive monitoring practices and measurement tools in place
7. Department sharing of strategies that prove to be helpful in improving the students' learning and achieving the targets set
8. Mutual caring and belief in the importance of personal relationships.

SCHOOL 8 - TECHNOLOGY AND CONGRUENCE

These kids don't know how good they can be. (Teacher)

Profile

This is a school that has re-invented itself. It opened in 1968 as a vocational high school with 1,000 students; by 1991 it had dropped to 300 students, then changed into a school with a broad array of programs in Grades 10 to 12. It now serves 1540 students, including 135 students with special needs. The students are mainly lower middle-class and come from a catchment area some distance away or from around the city. The school has 76 teachers most of whom have come since 1991, over half under 40 years of age. The current principal has been there since September 2000. There are enriched programs, enriched courses in core areas, a broad range of career and technology courses and advanced placement is being introduced. The operating budget is $8.75 million. The school prepares a three-year plan with achievement targets in provincial examinations and the school has a course completion rate of 92%.

Climate

The school's vision and mission statement is widely publicized and shared. There is agreement within the school community that a most important emphasis is on achievement in the provincial examinations but with a focus on a well-balanced school. Many means are taken to recognize student achievements in academic and non-academic work. Students' view of teachers is very positive. There is both a code of conduct and a code of ethics. In the first eight months of the 2000-2001 school year there were 225 suspensions including 18 expulsions. Classroom computers are used to monitor and follow-up attendance problems. Safety is a major priority, students are required to carry identification and a full-time police officer (school resource officer) is on staff.

Areas of the hallways and grounds are monitored by television. Students describe the climate as accepting and tolerant and the physical facilities are neat, clean and attractive. There are a variety of teams and clubs run by the staff with student involvement.

Leadership

In general, parents, staff and students participate in decision making. There is an administrative team of a principal and three assistants, a faculty council representing departments, a parents council, and various groups through which students can provide input into decisions. Leadership is collaborative and firm and derives its philosophy from the vision and mission statement of the school developed in the early 1990s.

Staff

Because of the rapid increase in student population and change in the school's mandate, a good deal of attention has been given to staff selection. Teachers were selected by committees of administrators, staff, students and sometimes parents. Criteria of selection included student orientation, versatility, willingness to collaborate and enthusiasm for teaching their subject. Teachers are expected to have annual plans with specific goals; a formal evaluation, based on observations by administrators, takes place every three years. Parents are impressed by the availability of teachers to help their children. Innovations include locally developed courses that provide alternative learning opportunities such as a program in Aboriginal studies. A great deal of attention is placed on student achievement. Teachers regularly share materials with one another especially with new teachers. Of the 21 winners of awards for excellence in teaching in the province, two were from this school.

Focus on Success and Ongoing Growth

The school was selected to be one of two schools in the province designated as a professional development school, a project of the teachers' association, the university and the school district. The school works with undergraduate student teachers and is a member of the School Research Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association. There are many professional development opportunities for teachers and personal development activities for students, including mentorships and leadership seminars. In addition to the Aboriginal studies program, innovations include a wellness center, film studies, theatre appreciation, writers workshop, sports performance, marine biology, a distinctive homeroom program, a law project, and special programs in mathematics and physics. The three-year school development plan establishes priorities including emphasis on mathematics and language arts with achievement and retention targets. As an illustration of the increased academic orientation of the school, academic results have improved and more students have obtained scholarships. The school was a pilot school to introduce a computerized student information system with classroom telephones and computers containing attendance, lates, marks, and special information.

Instructional Organization, Planning and Strategies

The school has two or more streams in core subjects as well as enrichment classes. A program called FIRST (Focus in Research, Science and Technology) prepares students for post-secondary science and applied science programs. Physmatics is a two-year course blending physics and mathematics. Language courses are given in French, Spanish, German and Japanese. There are four music programs as well a programs in art, performing arts, film studies and theatre appreciation. Sixteen courses are offered in career and technology studies in such skills as information processing, business management, fashion, food, construction, legal studies, and cosmetology. The school is proud of its achievements in mathematics and science. There are eight computer labs with Internet access, including one assigned to each of the four core subject areas for its full-time use, a learning resource center with on-line and research facilities, computers in each classroom and laptops on reserve.

Programs are given in five 75-minute periods per day, from 7:30 a.m. to 3:25 p.m. with a 20-minute homeroom period in the morning. Written outlines are prepared for all courses, listing key concepts, expectations, evaluation procedures and weighting of various sections for the final mark. Teaching through all the grades stresses preparation for the provincial diploma examinations; in some subjects such as English there is a fair amount of flexibility in approach, in others such as mathematics there is a uniform structure and system of examinations. In core subjects, technologies, languages, the arts and physical education the school offers opportunities for everyone to achieve success. To assist them, in their personal and career planning, there is a student services centre with two coordinators, a department head, and three full-time counsellors.

Community

There is no local community for the school; it is a school which parents and their children choose and to which they travel. The parents are very supportive of the school and its stress on high expectations and achievement, diversity of opportunities, and teacher involvement. The school has formed partnerships with an institute of technology to develop common courses and with the university for mentorship programs.

Elements of Success

1. External expectations to improve achievement
2. Vision and mission statements which set direction for the operation of the school
3. Focus on the individual student and how to optimize learning, including but not exclusively achievement on examinations
4. Staff commitment to personal growth and support by administration in their efforts
5. Strong emphasis on safety; zero tolerance for serious or continuing inappropriate behavior
6. Staff deliberately and carefully chosen to reflect the vision for the school, with a mixture of expertise and youthful energy
7. Support available to students at noon hour and after school
8. Ongoing and consistent direction by the administration
9. Increasing use of technology in instruction.

THE SCHOOLS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA: CONTEXT

There are three major influences shaping secondary schools in British Columbia: the Ministry of Education that provides general policies, program guidelines and resources, and that tests students in Grade 12 for diploma qualification; the school districts that manage schools and assign teachers and other resources to schools; and the teachers' union (British Columbia Teachers' Federation) that exercises considerable influence on the assignment and working life of teachers. Parent Advisory Councils have been provided for in the law but they vary in their influence.

Schools differ in the degree to which they practice site-based management. Budgets are centralized with core funding for districts and per-pupil grants based on enrolment. Principals have limited control over the selection of teachers. Schools have defined boundaries but students can cross boundary lines.

There is a system of school accreditation which occurs every six years for a school and includes 27 indicators. Schools prepare a report on their results, a team visits the school, and a final report is prepared. Accreditation may be renewed, withdrawn, or extended for a short period.

Diploma requirements include success in Grade 12 examinations as well as courses such as Career and Personal Planning and 30 hours work experience for all graduating students. Schools focus on Grade 12 results and the Ministry publishes participation rates and results in examinations.

A number of secondary schools offer programs targeted to special groups (such as Aboriginal students) or special content (such as the International Baccalaureate program) or special languages (such as Mandarin) and some have programs which attract foreign students.

SCHOOL 9 - TRADITION AND INNOVATION

We prepare our kids for life, for the information age ... We give the kids a second chance here. (Principal)

Profile

The community in which the school is situated in an older part of the city with increases in the older and young adult populations but declines in the number of children and adolescents. There is an increase in non-English speaking, Asian and Indo-Canadian populations, combined with an increase in single-parent families and a decline in family income. The character of the community has also been changing, from farming to commercial and service sectors and from single family residences to condos and high-rise apartments. Nearly half of the 978 students can walk to school and most of the students are lower middle class; others, more upper middle class, come from outside the local district, attracted by the school's reputation and by the International Baccalaureate program it offers.

Climate

The climate of the school, the kind of personal relations and leadership, staff, and the rich array of programs and extracurricular activities are the hallmark of the school. The hallways are filled with trophies and awards from the past and present and with pictures of former students, many of whom have gone on to successful careers. There is a mix of hard work, risk taking and fun, and a mix of tradition and innovation. The school accreditation report in 2000 praised the high level of commitment of the staff and administration to student success.

Leadership

The principal and two assistants have complementary skills: technology and team building, multicultural and athletics dimensions, and academics especially fine arts and languages. The administration is preoccupied with professional development, staff accountability and student results. Priority is also given to leadership development in teachers and students. An elected staff representative team works with the administration on contractual issues and shares in school decision making; the student council is active in a variety of school activities.

Staff

In recent years there has been a major influx of young teachers into the school; in 1999 half of the teachers had under 10 years' experience (compared to a provincial average of 42%). Teachers in the school are described by parents and students as excellent role models. Staff evaluation and visits to classrooms follow the policies of the teachers' contract and staff development is organized by a staff committee. There are now limited opportunities for staff selection and new teachers are coached by experienced staff. Department heads are responsible for instructional leadership in their area and, with the principal, for teacher assignments. There is a high degree of collegiality among professional staff, administration and support staff.

Focus on Success and Ongoing Growth

Classroom observations showed clear planning and instructional focus, high expectations and rich learning environment, engagement in learning and regular feedback. In the school, emphasis is placed on data collection, test data and student performance. School performance on provincial examinations is above the provincial average. School attendance rates are the best in the region. School publications feature graduates who have been successful in business, sports, and the professions. Teachers and students have won international awards; theatrical productions and sports teams have also won numerous awards and students have performed in western Canada, the United States and Japan.

Instructional Organization, Planning and Strategies

The school offers a full program from Ministry courses to unique courses such as jazz band, salmon stocks enhancement, law, visual arts, food preparation and dance. There are a number of alternative academic programs: a two-year International Baccalaureate program for students throughout the school district; an integrated studies program where students and teachers stay in the same group for a two-year period and where learning outcomes are met in thematic, integrated lessons; a life skills program with community-based work experience for students at risk; English second-language courses; a program called New Beginnings for teens who are parenting or pregnant, with integrated courses and a licensed daycare facility; a district-wide learning disabilities program to support students to succeed in regular classrooms.

The school operates on a modular timetable with some subjects receiving more instructional time than others. This system is considered unique in British Columbia and students receive credit after completing a series of required modules. There is an almost endless variety of school activities including trips, spirit weeks, pep rallies, band and choir retreats, and a 30-hour famine.

Community

Community involvement is an important part of the school mission and includes hospital support services, food bank for the needy, foster children in third-world countries and services offered free to senior citizens. Communications with parents and the community involve a newsletter, media announcements and the school web page.

Elements of Success

1. Common vision and congruency of high expectations, planning, goal-setting and training
2. Institutionalization of the use of multi-dimensional data pertaining to student and school results to ensure continuous improvement
3. Strong, caring, committed and experienced staff
4. Emphasis on student safety and on high behavioral standards
5. Collaborative leadership team focused on student and school success indicators
6. Appreciation of diversity, ethnic and cultural differences
7. Efforts of volunteers
8. Focus on intellectual development.

SCHOOL 10 - DIVERSITY AND SHARING

> *[The parents] want strong academics, strong test results and excellent learning so that the students can enter university and then find decent jobs. (Parent)*

Profile

Located in the centre of a fast growing suburb, the school's catchment area is multi-cultural and multi-religious, 80% of the 1920 students are of Asian background, and English is not spoken in one-third of the homes. The school's average annual income is slightly below average. The community is described as very traditional. The school has maintained its enrolment level in a period of district enrolment declines and is praised by parents for its nurturing environment and caring staff. Although the technology resources of the school are limited, there is evidence of some use of computers for research and assignments.

Climate

The school culture is positive, engaging and secure; this is appreciated by both students and parents. Efforts are made to respect diverse opinions and also to develop a shared vision for the school. Security in the school is a major preoccupation because, as one student said, "out there though, it's a very rough place."

Leadership

The principal is described as a change agent committed to building leadership potential in staff and students. She is highly visible in the school and, though new to the school, has fostered a number of innovations including advanced placement, on school spirit and leadership clubs, and senior student mentors for incoming students. The administrators work to provide a positive school culture and supporting learning environment.

Staff

Most of the current staff were in place when the principal came. There is a staff committee that handles contractual issues and professional development. The principal is not expected to write evaluation reports on teachers; staff submit professional goals at the end of the year. Teachers try to make lessons challenging and attempt to meet the needs of "reluctant learners." In Grade 12, teachers focus on government examinations and offer tutorials in test writing. Counsellors and teachers try to individualize instruction and take into consideration the particular needs of each student. The staff are recognized by administration, students, parents and the school district as highly professional and effective.

Focus on Success and Ongoing Growth

Goal setting and the analysis of student achievement results are major areas of focus. Students do well on government examinations, survey results are very favorable, and student performance in public speaking, science fairs and artistic presentations are recognized. Attendance data are included in the goal-setting process and the school improvement plan. In recent years the school received excellent evaluations in the school accreditation.

Instructional Organization, Planning and Strategies

The school is on a semester system with 75-minute periods. A wide selection of programs and courses are offered: the advanced placement program with over 700 students enrolled; modified and special courses for students with learning difficulties, including "learning through computers" programs; enrichment and tutorial sessions offered during lunch hour and after school, which are partly responsible for 88 students this year receiving provincial scholarships; conflict resolution strategies; anger management strategies; drug and alcohol programs; assertiveness skill development organized by the counseling department; student career development services; programs for special needs students; an equivalency program for students not able to cope with the regular program; and workplace training and apprentice programs.

Community

There is extensive involvement of students in the community, there is a liaison group that supports school efforts and programs and the local media publicize school activities and accomplishments.

Elements of Success

1. Parental support and high expectations
2. Student work ethic and commitment to learning
3. Staff commitment to results and teacher modeling of expectations
4. Excellent and supportive administration
5. Appreciation of diversity and different cultures
6. Rich and deep programs
7. Stress on data, balanced assessment, and academics
8. Quality feeder schools.

SCHOOL 11 - A TRADITION OF EXCELLENCE

> *This is our school, you know. I attended this school, my wife attended this school, my children attended this school and now a grandchild is attending here. (senior volunteer)*

Profile

Located in the south of a large urban area, the school is surrounded by multi-residential and single-family housing complexes and is near a commercial area. The building is 50 years old and last year a major addition was constructed. The school's socio-economic status is below average for the district and for the province, and backgrounds vary from transient to professional and business. The student body is 1977 in size and is ethnically diverse with a large Asian population. The upper middle-class students are largely drawn to two of the school's programs, French Immersion and International Baccalaureate. Most students live in walking distance of the school and come from six feeder elementary schools. There are also some students from the Republic of China. Around 70% of graduates go on to postsecondary education due, it is believed, to a combination of staff support, family influence and student commitment. The school makes extensive use of technology and gives considerable emphasis to the school's traditions.

Climate

Parents and students perceive the school as having a highly charged academic environment, an active co-curricular program, a safe environment, a supportive parent community, a motivated group of students, a quality staff and an administration focused on student outcomes. There is zero tolerance for major misbehavior such as drugs, smoking and cheating, and the school atmosphere is orderly and friendly. Hallways highlight student achievements and classrooms display motivational posters.

Leadership

The principal's view of leadership includes the following elements: clear vision for student success, high expectations, selection and training of a committed staff, collaborative decision making, planning and caring human relations. Administrators are visible in the school, in classrooms and at school functions. Emphasis is placed on collecting data on student achievement, professional development of teachers, and encouraging leadership among staff and students.

Staff

The teachers are highly regarded in the community as talented and caring, and they are called upon to train teachers throughout the district. Teachers are described as having a passion for their subject as well as positive, individualized relationships with their students. Few new teachers have been hired recently; the administrators give written evaluations to all teachers and professional development is organized by a staff committee.

Focus on Success and Ongoing Growth

Continuous school improvement is widely regarded as an essential step towards school effectiveness. Professional development activities are aligned with school improvement plans. Three years ago, the external accreditation team commented on the school's commitment to student success. Emphasis is placed on evaluation and assessment and on the analysis of results to maintain and improve performance. Grade 12 examination results are analyzed and compared over time and with other schools in the district.

Instructional Organization, Planning and Strategies

The timetable is a modified two-semester system with some courses running through the year; the duration of periods is 75 minutes. The school offers regular, modified and honours courses. Elective courses include business, industrial education, home economics, art, German, music and choir. There are high enrolments in the programs of the International Baccalaureate, French Immersion and International Studies and many students in these programs come from outside the catchment area. There are also special education courses and a career and personal planning program is offered to all students from Grades 8 to 12. For some courses, outcomes, homework assignments, test results, planned activities and timelines are posted on the school's web page. Several new programs (such as the alternative education program and peer coaching) have been introduced to help students who need individual attention and a honours program targets academically talented students in Grade 10.

Community

Students and staff are involved in a variety of volunteer activities, from helping people in need to tutoring other students, conflict resolution, and teaching technology skills to members of the community. Parents are supportive of the school especially in such areas as fundraising and sports.

Elements of Success

1. School's vision, mission and goals and the strong traditions of the school
2. Range and flexibility of program and extra-curricular choices available to students
3. School's international focus and appreciation of diversity
4. Quality of students and their commitment to learning
5. High levels of achievement in examinations, attendance, and low dropout rate
6. Engagement of staff and students in school life
7. Expertise, caring and competence of staff and their commitment to ongoing improvement
8. Visibility and visionary leadership of administrators
9. High level of parental suppport for learning
10. Large number of students going on to postsecondary education.

SCHOOL 12 - TURNING AROUND

> *I am the building expansion manager, the disciplinarian, the staff evaluator, the accreditation leader, the "cleaner upper," the cheerleader, the supervisor of all these students and the one who has to investigate and deal with grievances and contractual issues. Where do I get the time to be what I really want – the instructional leader? (Principal)*

Profile

The city in the Fraser Valley, where the school is located, is an area of major population growth. The student background is primarily middle to lower middle class and a large proportion of parents are blue collar workers. About 40% of the 1420 students are Indo-Canadians. Most of the students come from the local area and the majority are in the regular academic stream; 123 students are given enrichment in specific academic subjects and another 120 are in modified courses that do not lead to full graduation status. Major improvements have taken place since the appointment of a new principal a year ago. The school is currently undergoing accreditation. The school district requires students to sing the national anthem; the school takes this policy seriously and student response is positive.

Climate

Since September 2000, the new leadership team has been introducing several initiatives: staff volunteers offer after-school assistance; student volunteers also help other students. The school's mission, vision and behavior expectations are prominently displayed and the focus has been placed on three areas: orderly environment, high achievement, and expectations for student success. A sense of family pervades the school and there is a lot of collaborative activity on the part of teachers and students. Special student and teacher groups help students resolve differences related to racism and violence, aid able students who need guidance and support, and respond to specific challenges. Students feel the school is a safe environment.

Leadership

Parents, students and staff generally express a high level of confidence in the principal and stress his ability to be both decisive and tactful in decision making, his focus on team building, his support of a variety of activities and his recognition of student and teacher contributions. He is committed to fundraising, technology as a learning tool and the collection of data on student success. Many remarked on the clear alignment among beliefs, vision, mission and practice at the school. The major approach is consensus building and team work.

Staff

The teachers seem comfortable in the school and content with their teaching assignments. The staff is well established, experienced and very involved in community events. There are rigorous staff selection procedures, but in the end teachers are assigned to the school more on the basis of the union contract than the needs of the school or the qualifications to fill a specific vacancy. Teachers' evaluation procedures are also dictated by the union contract. Teacher supervision and staff development are priorities and the staff members are clearly hard working, professional and committed to the success of their students through tutoring, supervising, assisting and coaching activities.

Focus on Success and Ongoing Growth

"Best practices" workshops were introduced for teachers of courses that are examined provincially and there was a marked improvement in student results. Teachers have been encouraged to lead professional workshops on important topics. Departments submit action plans showing success indicators and strategies. There is an enrichment program for 100 students identified by the feeder elementary schools as high achieving. The school organizes five staff development days and a student academic honor roll is kept. The accreditation process, occurring once every six years, is underway in the school and data are being collected on such areas as students' abilities, students' knowledge and sense of values, outcomes related to different subject areas of the curriculum, the school's provision for different kinds and styles of student learning, evaluation, school environment, programs and services, staff collegiality and information for parents. Evidence must be provided for each of the topics and this drives the school improvement plan.

Instructional Organization, Planning and Strategies

The school offers several special programs including learning assistance, career education, life skills, counselling services and family living. The timetable is organized on a two-semester system. Teachers spend considerable time and effort to provide a rich learning environment for the students, one with high expectations, flexible activities, constant feedback and active participation. Numerous learning resources are available to challenge and engage students. Many teachers integrate technology in their learning activities and computers are available to all students during and after school hours.

Community

There are a variety of links with community agencies, businesses and institutions, including work experience, partnerships, volunteer work for the aged, and use of technology. Parent involvement is highest for sports and fine arts activities; a parent advisory council meets regularly but is not as active as the school would hope.

Elements of Success

1. Leadership and initiative of the new administration
2. Ability of the school to adapt rapidly to a new mission, evolving from a junior high school to a full high school with greater attention paid to results
3. School accreditation process that facilitated planning for improvement
4. Successful responses to major challenges such as racial tensions
5. Positive attitudes of teachers to improvement, professional development and service to students
6. Expansion of programs to meet the needs of the students.

Chapter 5
Patterns

CONTEXT

All of these schools share a characteristic: their environments and the communities they serve have undergone significant changes over the years, challenging the schools to meet new needs and develop new responses.

For the most part, these schools are creations of the 1950s and 1960s, a period of rapid expansion of secondary education, large comprehensive high schools, wide array of courses, and buildings that were referred to as, and looked like, physical plants. But in the 1980s and 1990s the environment of many schools changed. Populations moved out and other populations moved in. Policies of choice made boundaries and catchment areas permeable. Some schools lost students to other schools and found themselves in a competitive environment. Local districts aged and many became poorer and more violent. A whole new ethnic and linguistic mix of students began to come to the school, with different backgrounds, different needs, and different expectations. In some school environments, these changes occurred rapidly, in a matter of a few years.

All of these schools share a characteristic: their environments and the communities they serve have undergone significant changes over the years, challenging the schools to meet new needs and develop new responses.

In an increasingly competitive environment, schools became more conscious of the need to market themselves, define their mission, stress their distinctiveness from other schools in the local community or the city at large. They began to promote themselves, develop new programs and services that would attract new clientele and establish contact with prospective students in their "feeder" schools.

For some schools this meant relying on their reputation and promoting their traditions; for others it meant reinvention and transformation and a new mission: linguistic and cultural integration, "old fashioned" values, a shift from vocational to academic orientation, traditional academic expectations, or a safe environment.

And for almost every school, changing external forces – in the community, in the city and school district, in the province, and in the structure of the education system – urged new preoccupations:

security, academic achievement primarily in terms of test results, accountability, marketing, developing new programs such as the International Baccalaureate and Mandarin, and initiatives to motivate and engage students.

Schools are attempting to extend the range of communities that they serve and at the same time preserve roots in a distinctive and specific community tradition. Even a school with many problems is considered by the students and by the people in the local district as "their" school. At the same time, school populations and school communities are becoming pluralistic, with different values and aspirations. Most of these schools do not fit the stereotype of the low-income school; many are poor in terms of family income but not in terms of home culture or educational aspirations. For many students, school is not a mirror of their communities but a refuge from threatening situations in homes, shopping malls and street corners. And to many principals and teachers, the local school neighborhood is the home to only a minority of their students.

CLIMATE

Much has been written about the importance of school climate or ethos for school effectiveness and these schools seem to have been taking this concept seriously.

A good deal of attention is paid by administrators and teachers to the climate of their school and to establishing, or preserving, a delicate balance between potentially conflicting pressures: examination marks and broader cultural and personal definitions of success; safety and security on the one hand and an open, friendly, supportive environment on the other; holding high expectations for achievement and performance as well as adapting teaching and programs to the realistic potential of individual learners.

Without exception, these are traditional schools. The authority of the school is clear and well defined. A great deal is made in most schools about commitment or engagement to the core values represented in a mission statement. Almost all schools have developed a code of conduct, many with precise definitions of expectations, prohibitions and penalties; zero tolerance is frequently mentioned. Even if some schools involve teachers and students (and more rarely parents) in decisions about the school, nevertheless the line of authority from principal to teachers to students is unambiguous.

There are three defining elements of the climate in these schools: security, examinations and personal relationships.

Because many of these schools are in neighborhoods with a reputation for violence, schools go to considerable effort to promote an image of safety and security; two have full-time police officers on staff, a number use security cameras, neighborhood violence is kept outside the school walls. Administrators are present throughout the school, supervision is serious, rules are often posted throughout the building. As a result, students generally appreciate the safe environment which these schools provide and do not appear especially constrained by the network of rules. This is largely because of efforts to maintain warm personal relationships between staff and students.

There is little doubt in most schools that much of the instructional organization is directed to improving student results on government examinations at the end of secondary school.

Administrators point with pride (or anxiety) to their results, comparing them with other schools and with other years. In many schools, most notably those in Alberta, there is tight coordination among examination results, examination preparation, testing throughout the grades, teaching and programs. To demonstrate their academic quality, these schools in all three provinces act as prep schools for external examinations. Parents and district personnel appreciate good results and schools are encouraged in many not so subtle ways to improve their performance, i.e., their test scores. At the same time, administrators and teachers recognize the importance of other forms and measures of success and the need to acknowledge them: artistic performance, community service, contribution to school life and other students, and achievements in subsequent studies and careers. Many schools routinely decorate the building with student art and photographs; some have portraits of graduates successful in different fields; some have monthly awards and recognition days; projects, theatre productions, exhibitions and sports events get prominent attention.

All the schools place great stress on the importance of personal relationships in the developing of school climate. The focus on exam achievement may seem impersonal, but it may also strengthen the sense of collaboration between teachers and students in preparing for an external challenge, in the results of which they all have a stake. Students in the most seriously underachieving school, no less than those in schools with a tradition of high performance, all praise the quality of personal interaction with administrators and teachers, and their availability and willingness to listen and help.

In a sense, these schools are operating on two levels: a formal level of mission statements, examination preparation, security regulations, codes, and structured instruction and a less formal level of student life, teacher-student contacts, and community action. It may be the degree to which these formal and less formal aspects are kept in balance is the degree to which the school may to be successful.

LEADERSHIP

In all the schools, the single most influential person is the principal. It is the principal who holds formal authority for the management of the school, the organization of activities, the guidance of staff and students, and the responsibility for results. Increasingly, principals are also expected to set a vision for the school, inspire common action and provide leadership to teachers, students and parents. When schools are successful and when they are "turned around," it is usually a principal or series of principals who receive most of the credit; it is usually the principal that best articulates an overall view of the present of the school and a vision of its future; when schools falter and slip into decline, it is also the principal who receives much of the blame, certainly from the teachers. Either way, principals are powerful influences on the vitality of a school, whether they stay a decade or come and go every couple of years.

In almost all of the schools, students, teachers, parents and district administrators attest to the qualities of leadership of the principal. The words commonly used by these groups and by the principals themselves are vision, presence, communication, participation, support, cornerstone, goal setting, planning, order and rigor, firmness, teamwork, innovator, change agent, decisiveness, tact, consistency.

These are high and varied expectations for one person to meet and it is interesting to note that the principals in five of these twelve schools are new to the job (within a year of the study) and that at least two others will soon retire. In some cases the new principals speak of building upon the work of the predecessors, in other cases of a mandate to turn around the school.

The trend to site-based management adds more responsibility to the principal's role but not necessarily more power. Only in the Alberta schools does the principal hold the power to select staff and control school budgets; in British Columbia and Quebec the principal's power is limited by teachers' collective agreements and bureaucratic regulations.

There are three broad models of leadership at work in these schools, though the distinctions among them are not sharp. Some principals (and former principals) are referred to as strong and decisive, even "top-down" in their approach, but many of their decisions were considered beneficial to the school. Some principals are inclusive and participatory in their approach, working regularly with staff councils, student associations, parent groups and especially department heads to arrive at decisions (consensus is a term sometimes used but this may be too strong a word). A few other principals (one-quarter at most) see their role as building leadership skills in their teachers and students. In light of the mobility of principals, this model makes school leadership more deeply rooted in the institution, less dependent on the views of one person, and less fragile.

In a couple of schools there has been a history of conflict between principals and teachers, or at least a group of teachers. In many other schools there is a clear separation of responsibility between "management" and "staff," with rights and responsibilities codified in union contracts and district policies. In both kinds of situations, the authority of the principal in many key areas of leadership is more moral than legal and the skills of confidence building, mediation and tolerance are important qualities, especially during the period at the beginning of the term of a new principal when he or she must first win the trust of staff and students.

The importance of the role and person of the principal is greater in schools with low-income environments.

It also seems that the importance of the role and person of the principal is greater in schools with low-income environments and in schools with great ethnic diversity than it may be in schools that are more affluent, that rest on a stable tradition, and that are more homogeneous in expectations and values. The principal can and must speak for the school in a way no other person or group can, and parents, students and communities look to the principal for leadership to a greater extent in these schools, perhaps, than in other situations.

STAFF

From the students' point of view, it is the teachers who are the most influential people in school life, second in many cases to friends and peers. Students praise teachers not so much for being experts in their subjects (though being passionate about their subject is mentioned), but about being able to communicate, being open, being willing and available to help them and, above all, being willing to listen.

It is sometimes said that the staff should reflect the ethnic and culture mix of the student body. Yet many of these schools have changed in student composition much faster than it has been possible to alter the composition of the teaching staff. This has required experienced teachers to change their approach and to learn about the values of other cultures. The rise of single-parent families in these communities has placed new burdens of counselling and modeling on teachers, as some of the few adults with whom the adolescents come in contact. Administrators and teachers now find themselves as "translators" of customs as well as languages, and daytime parents as well as instructors.

In Quebec and British Columbia, teacher attitudes and conduct are more influenced by their unions than they appear to be in Alberta. In those two provinces, there is a more contractual and formal approach to workload and organizational relationships, although this does not seem to impede the day-to-day operations of the school or the relationships with students.

Some schools have relatively young staffs because they have increased their enrolments in recent years or have changed their mission; other schools have an experienced staff with some of the teachers having attended the school as students and spent most of their teaching career in the school.

Teachers are organized in the schools in different ways – by departments, by subjects, by grade level, by teams. Usually there are positions between teacher and administrator (department head, team leader) that have responsibilities for coordination and planning. In most schools there are common expectations that teachers will be "student oriented," committed to the school, engaged in various forms of activities, and willing to give more time than the minimum to help students.

The issue of teacher evaluation and supervision is a sensitive one in many places; formal evaluation of teaching ability is usually restricted to young and untenured teachers, some principals make a habit of informal supervision of teachers in classrooms, and departments often share ideas and materials to help teachers in difficulty. Teachers in some schools are expected to prepare plans for professional improvement and professional development activities are provided in most schools, increasingly with explicit links to the pedagogical goals of the school. The big push in professional development is on evaluation of students and analysis of student results on examinations in order to improve attainment.

FOCUS ON SUCCESS AND ONGOING GROWTH

Schools differ on how they approach success, what their priorities for success are, how seriously they work to achieve success, and how they prepare their students to be successful. But they all use marks on government examinations at the end of secondary school as the most important measure of student achievement and school success. Averages, pass rates, per cent of students completing diploma requirements, and comparisons with other schools of their type, other schools in the district and provincial averages are all important indicators to schools about how successful they are.

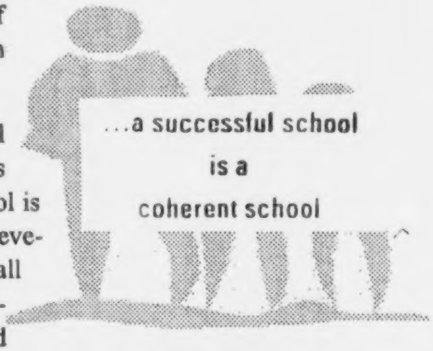
The best schools are those that prepare their students well to write the final examinations. The school's reputation is largely dependent on this index and it is an important element in the ongoing effort of schools to keep students in their immediate area and to attract students from elsewhere. Schools are improving when their average marks go up and principals are sent to schools to turn them around when their results are below expectations.

Schools use other indicators of success as well, even when they are doing well on examination results. Schools don't want to think of themselves as pure prep schools. Other indicators include such things as performances and tours by fine arts groups, exhibitions, awards for cultural and athletic achievement, scholarships, and in some places the achievements of successful graduates. Less often, schools mention efforts to improve retention rates, but little information seems to be in evidence about dropouts and the extent of the problem. Some schools - but not many - mention the per cent of students who go on to post-secondary studies but they seem to have no information about where they go, what they study, or how successful they are in completing their program.

The social and linguistic integration of different ethnic groups is a preoccupation of schools in Quebec, but seems less of a measure of success elsewhere except to the extent there are indicators of inter-ethnic and multi-cultural harmony in student life.

There are other measures of success that are more implicit and indirect: enrolment trends and the ability of the school to attract students in a competitive market; recognition of the reputation of the school in the community; variety of program offerings especially in languages, the arts, career preparation and enrichment; accreditation reports in British Columbia, satisfaction surveys in Alberta; willingness of non-francophone students in Quebec to speak French in school halls and on the street.

Nevertheless, a dominant model of the successful school is one that is clearly focused on examination results, or is striving to implement such a focus. The coherent school is one which includes: (a) a priority set on student achievement, (b) the careful analysis of examination results in all areas, (c) the integration of these data into planning programs and services, (d) links between these needs and professional development activities, (e) initiatives to correct deficiencies through remedial action, (f) alignment of curriculum and instruction with examination content and skills, especially in core areas of language and mathematics, (g) use of school examinations to prepare students for the content and style of government examinations, and (h) follow-up measures to ensure students are better prepared next time.



...a successful school
is a
coherent school

Many provinces and school districts are moving to a policy of systematic evaluation of institutions, based on government supplied data on retention and achievement, school self-study initiatives, and sometimes external evaluators. British Columbia has a well-developed system of accreditation for all schools every six years on a number of indicators.

INSTRUCTIONAL ORGANIZATION, PLANNING AND STRATEGIES

In many respects, the basic structure, organization and operation of secondary schools is similar in the three provinces. There are different kinds of organizations, different ways of planning and different approaches to teaching and curriculum, but these differences are as marked among schools in a province, or even in some cases within schools, as they are among provinces. There is an underlying set of assumptions and infrastructure in the way most traditional schools operate. They are becoming or striving to become more sensitive to examination results and student achievement and to the need to prepare students to improve their performance.

But there are important areas of difference.

There are differences in the curriculum structure of the schools in the three provinces: Alberta and British Columbia have many program similarities: core courses, a wide range of electives in the arts, career education and technology, and a number of courses developed by the school. There is a great deal of stress on extra-curricular activities and a tendency to merge extra-curricular (or, as some would call them, co-curricular) activities with the programs of the curriculum. Schools adapt programs to their clientele and they also use programs to attract new clientele: four of the eight schools in the two provinces have introduced International Baccalaureate programs with the express purpose of attracting an academically oriented clientele from outside; a number of the schools have introduced Mandarin courses in response to the large number of Asian students.

The programs in Quebec are different. They are largely academic, with stress on language (mastery of written and oral French), mathematics, and other subject disciplines. The regular academic programs are the norm; language classes (classes d'accueil) are to assist those with limited knowledge of French to integrate rapidly into the regular programs; programs for students with learning difficulties are for those who cannot complete the requirements of the regular program; in some schools there are academic and cultural enrichment courses for those who can go beyond the regular program in some areas; and there are practical programs preparing older adolescents with learning difficulties for the world of work. But in these Quebec schools there are no career and technology options, complementary to the academic core, such as we find in the schools in the other provinces.

To some degree these differences are due to an eleven-year system in Quebec and a twelve-year system in the other provinces, to the absence of middle schools in Quebec, to the system of cégeps where most career and technical training is provided, and to the preoccupation with the quality of the French language and the impetus to integrate non-Francophones into the French school system. In these Quebec schools there are no elite IB programs, no courses in Mandarin or Arabic, and no courses in hairdressing and computer-aided design for the general student. Where there is a major extension of the curriculum in one school, it is in the area of the fine arts. Nor do extracurricular activities seem to have the importance in school life (with one exception) that they have in the Alberta and B.C. schools.

In general, there is surprisingly little mention of computers in the schools. Many have computer labs that teachers and students can use but there is only one instance where a school says it puts its course outline on its web page and no other mention of school web pages. There are illustrations of the use of technology to enforce disciplinary rules, control absences, manage marks and enhance security; there are very few illustrations of the integration of computers into the curriculum and into the daily teaching and learning activities of the school.

B.C. diploma requirements call for a certain number of hours of work experience for all senior students, and there are work experience programs in other schools, but few schools seem to be actively promoting work-study programs, apprenticeships, or partnerships with industry to help student ease the transition from school to working life.

In their general approach to teaching and learning, these schools appear to be traditional.

In their general approach to teaching and learning, these schools appear to be traditional, using structured teaching, testing, academic support, and student assignments to reach, motivate, and train their students. While one school mentions teacher workshops in "strategic teaching" (using cognitive and constructivist approaches to build meaning), it is not clear to what extent this has seeped into the classrooms of the school.

COMMUNITY

For many of the schools, community identity is ambiguous and some of the schools have different communities: a local geographic district that is less significant to the school than in the past, a set of overlapping ethnic and linguistic communities that have different attitudes towards schooling, communities of those who have chosen this school, and imported communities of students who come from a distance because of specific courses or programs offered by the school.

Some of the schools make special efforts to communicate with the community of parents and prospective students through newsletters, publications (a couple of which are quite impressive), open houses, and meetings. All jurisdictions have legislated some form of parental involvement in school decision making (school councils, parent advisory committees, governing boards), but there is little evidence that parents in these schools are a significance influence on school policy and direction. There is an impression that parents act most often as cheerleaders for the school's reputation and volunteers for its extra-curricular activities.

Many of the administrators express a desire to have more parents involved, especially on parent committees, but cite practical obstacles such as single parent families, working parents, and the cultural traditions of some ethnic groups. Schools do seem to be trying to reflect parents' values, wishes, and expectations at least in a general way.

Some schools are more active corporate citizens of their communities than other schools – encouraging their students to volunteer to help elderly and sick people and provide some community services. Some schools have ongoing contacts with community groups such as ethnic associations. Many schools pay special attention to public relations and media exposure of their activities. Still there is no real sense of strong community-related projects or other efforts to link the students' school life with community life.

ELEMENTS OF SUCCESS

There are a number of elements which seem associated with the success of these schools: (see Figure 5-1)

Figure 5-1

ELEMENTS OF SUCCESS

- Positive attitudes and high expectations for success
- Strong and vigilant administration
- Focus on academic achievement but also on other indicators of success and student needs
- Recognition of the need to be accountable for the quality of performance, and to be creative and innovative, sometimes with a sense of urgency if the future of the school is to be assured
- Regular analysis of results, and links between results and school efforts in assessment, program development, instruction, and innovation
- Integrated planning and coordination by administrators, departments and teachers to improve performance and link goals, planning and activities
- Importance placed on good teaching, good teachers as role models and the professional development of teachers
- Sense of engagement and belonging among teachers and students and commitment to the basic mission and core values of the school
- Respectful and secure school climate and warm relationships among educators and students
- Initiatives to motivate students and make learning relevant
- Structured classroom instruction and "traditional" standards of behavior
- Assistance and support for both students and teachers
- Variety and flexibility of structures, programs and services
- Strong support for the school from its geographic community or its community of choice

OBSERVATIONS

1. All these schools may be technically low-income schools but they differ in the degree to which the school must deal with what is usually considered a culture of poverty (poor nutrition and health, low expectations, sense of fatalism and hopelessness, lack of significant adult role models, and so on).

2. From the point of view of SES, there are two kinds of schools: those serving largely poor children from families on social assistance or low income (Schools 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 12) and those serving a mixed clientele (Schools 4, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11). The latter contain two distinct groups: local low-income students and a second group attracted to the school from outside because of reputation or services.

3. In almost all schools, the presence of a large number of students from different ethnic groups, either in a few concentrations or widely dispersed on ethnic and linguistic lines, alters the nature of the schools and makes them different from stereotypical low-income schools and from one another. We should be cautious about generalizations about low-income schools defined on the basis of census data of family income.

Successful schools recognize the characteristics of their student population and make efforts to meet those needs.

4. Successful schools recognize the characteristics of their student population and make efforts to meet these needs. In Quebec, these efforts are in the areas of improved services to learn French and activities to encourage the integration of immigrants into Quebec society; in the other provinces, these efforts are in the areas of encouraging tolerance and respect for diversity and providing some courses in languages (especially Mandarin) and enriched academic programs such as the International Baccalaureate program.

5. Using results on government secondary school-leaving examinations (such as average marks on examinations) is a limited index of academic achievement for these schools and may be seriously misleading unless combined with related indices such as retention rates, graduation rates, per cent of students achieving honors or equivalent status, per cent writing advanced courses in basic subjects. They should also be combined with other indicators of performance on which the repute of the school may rest (employment of graduates in vocational programs, artistic, cultural and athletic productions, community service, awards and prizes).

Schools need more complete and more comprehensive data if they are going to pursue seriously a results-driven approach to planning and development.

6. All schools are preoccupied with the performance of their students on government examinations as an indicator of effectiveness. But a school's effectiveness must be judged on the degree to which it prepares its students for later studies, careers and life. Using test results assumes that test performance is correlated with subsequent success in post-secondary programs, completion rates, and career achievements in terms of employment rates, income, and types of careers. Some direct and immediate measures of achievement may obscure the contribution of schools (positive or negative) to longer term student performance.

7. Schools need more complete and more comprehensive data if they are going to pursue seriously a results-driven approach to planning and development. In particular, they need to know what happens to students who do not complete secondary studies, and they must have follow-up data on their students who graduate and continue in post-secondary education and work.

An indicator of the success of these schools is the degree to which they succeed in motivating their students.

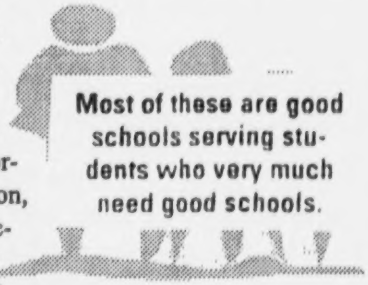
8. It may be that the most significant indicator of the success of these schools is the degree to which they succeed in motivating their students, expanding their reach to new clientele, providing safe and secure learning environments for their students, and bringing together in a more or less harmonious community young people of many different ethnic groups, religions, cultures and languages.

9. The elements of success in these schools do not seem to differ significantly from those found in the research literature: positive climate of order and security, active leadership, collaboration among teachers, supporting programs and services, high expectations for performance, behavior and achievement for all students, warm personal relationships between educators and students and a wide range of learning opportunities and resources for all students. Schools appear to falter when one of these elements is missing or threatened.

The elements of success in these schools do not seem to differ significantly from those found in the research literature.

10. Educators in these schools – administrators, teachers, counselors, and other personnel including support staff – seem to require special qualities that may be less crucial (though desirable) in other schools. Many of their students come from homes that are on the margins of Canadian society, either because of poverty, family structure or cultural and linguistic divides. Educators must assume responsibilities for certain aspects of parenting, they must concentrate on special efforts to reach these students emotionally as well as intellectually, they need to be models in how they motivate these students and they have to be imaginative in the selection of content and use of teaching approaches. Everyone says it is the administrators and teachers who "make the difference," and what they do to make this difference needs to be acknowledged.

11. Student life and extra-curricular activities in these schools take on a special significance. They are more than elements of school climate and rewards for good students. They are not something added to the "real" work of the school (the curriculum and classroom instruction), but are an integral part of the learning experience that school provides, normally not otherwise available to these students in summer camps, private music classes, community centres, family vacations and other cultural programs in the community. The successful schools are those that take these activities as seriously as they do the "regular" program.


Most of these are good schools serving students who very much need good schools.

12. In the neutral sense of the word, these are traditional schools, based on long established assumptions of authority, discipline, schedules, attendance, formal instruction, testing and marking. It is possible these schools are successful precisely because they are traditional. Still, they have not ventured very far in the direction of some of the new ideas in learning (constructivist methods, cooperative learning, project work, independent study), most have not made a priority of integrating information technologies in their teaching and learning activities, and few have found it necessary to promote community-based learning activities to contextualize the academic learning they promote.

13. Most of these are good schools serving students who very much need good schools.

Chapter 6
Reflections

Beneath these patterns, there are some underlying tensions in all schools that need to be analyzed. These are:

1. The links which the school makes between the larger context and the local community
2. How schools try to balance a sense of tradition and the need at times for re-invention and transformation
3. The shifting emphasis between social and economic values, and between values and skills
4. The importance of having a multi-dimensional understanding of what constitutes school success
5. The way in which testing alters the nature of the relationships between teacher and learner
6. The infrastructure of the school as a system
7. How different groups of participants – students, parents, administrators and teachers – can make, or unmake, a school
8. The diverging demands placed on a principal for leadership and management
9. The irony that the school, in the business of change, has difficulty itself as an institution facing change
10. How the changing nature of learning is in the process of reinventing teaching.

CONTEXT AND COMMUNITY

All secondary schools are trying to establish links between the larger social, political and economic context on the one hand and the local communities they serve on the other hand.

Schools operate within one kind of context, that of political systems, bureaucracies, structures from preschool to postgraduate, and a system of tests and certificates. They also operate in other contexts - a society, a labor market, a cultural milieu - and they are responsible for preparing their students for these contexts, to be responsible citizens, well-prepared workers, well-educated and rounded adults.

The other end of the link is the set of communities their students represent - social, economic, cultural, ethnic, religious and linguistic communities. In some schools, these communities are well rooted in the context and they may have been influential in shaping and defining the context; the linkage between context and community is most evident in the case of private schools. In these instances the divide between context and community is narrow and easily spanned by the school because students have many entrees to the context through their parents, peers, and social networks.

In other schools such as most of those in this study, the divide is usually larger: The poor in Montreal are on the fringes of Quebec society, many are alienated from its structure of power and institutions, and they cannot easily see their place and how to better it. Some of the groups in Alberta and B.C. may also have difficulties connecting with the larger Canadian context, not only because of language limitations but also because of a history, a cultural tradition, an ethical framework or a political inheritance. The poor parents of central Montreal and the immigrant parents of the West often cannot provide the bridge between context and community for their children and it is up to the school to offer this bridge, a task that is not always easy to accomplish.

Secondary schools that serve poor young people and those coming from another cultural and linguistic tradition have a different mission from others and this mission is not simply to socialize (integrate is the word of choice) into society, or to help them keep their traditions, or use multiculturalism or local economic disadvantage as a pedagogical tool to improve marks. It is a mission to contextualize teaching, to associate traditions of a community with elements of the society, to link by metaphor.

The challenge facing these schools is to reach their students, to link context and community, and this is not merely a pedagogical challenge of motivation. It is a curriculum challenge of meaning. A school's vision must be rooted not only in its understanding of its operation and the characteristics of its students and communities; it must also be rooted in its understanding of the changing and challenging demands of Canadian citizenship and the Canadian workplace in the 21st century, the demands of public discourse on sensitive and difficult political issues and the demands of occupational skills and problem solving in a rapidly evolving and fragile labor market.

> **Secondary schools that serve poor young people and those coming from another cultural and linguistic tradition have a different mission from others and this mission is not simply to socialize.**

TRADITION AND TRANSFORMATION

We see in these schools two pulls: one from the past and one from the present and future.

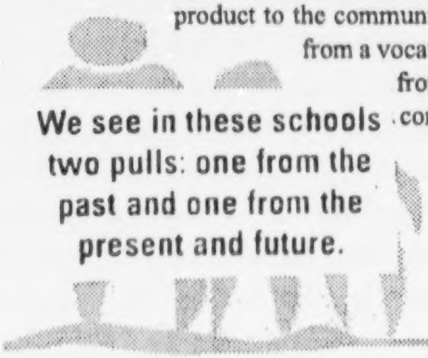
Schools are by nature conservative institutions – attached to their traditions, depending on continuity and stability for their legitimation, presenting to the young an order and framework of rules to help them define themselves and learn how to function in the society. And few schools are more conservative than secondary schools.

At the same time, schools may depend on the past but they must live in the present, respond to needs of young people who are at present in their care and they must prepare these students for the future as best the school can envision it.

Many of these schools are striving to find a balance between these pulls. They present a posture of tradition, many going to a good deal of trouble to emphasize their particular tradition, even exaggerate it, so that the students can see themselves as part of a continuity. The motto, the pictures on the wall, the reminders of the history of the school, the presence of teachers who have been in the school for a long time, even the promotion of so-called "old fashioned" values – all these are responses to the pull of the past on the present.

Yet many of these schools have been unable to maintain their traditions because their clientele and communities changed, staff came and went, new educational priorities were set for them by school district and government, other schools began to move ahead in popularity and reputation, their facilities and procedures began to show their age, and enrolments declined.

At that point, often in the early 1990s, some of these schools underwent a transformation, a renewal. Usually this was led by a new principal or series of principals who launched new programs, offered new services, found new funds, sought new clientele and marketed a new product to the community. Some schools changed their mission entirely, moving from a vocational school to a technology-oriented academic school, or from a junior high school to a senior high school, or from a comprehensive school to an academic school. Other schools are undergoing their renewal now, trying to improve their reputation and academic achievement.



We see in these schools two pulls: one from the past and one from the present and future.

Often it is not clear how this balance of continuity and change will be worked out. In more than one case, key personnel will be retiring or leaving and in some schools either the spirit of the tradition or the essence of the transformation, or both, are embodied in a handful of people. And as often happens, institutional memory may dim unless leadership is institutionalized and participants share ownership in the spirit and goals of the transformation.

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC VALUES

In the 1960s and 1970s, there was a good deal of talk about the role of social values in education. This was the era of questioning the assumptions of our society on a number of issues – human rights, racial equity, gender opportunities, equality of opportunity, the role of institutions in furthering human development, protection of the environment, our responsibilities to the third world, searching for peace, helping the poor and powerless. Schools were seen then as important social institutions that could make a significant contribution to individual well-being and social reform.

As time passed, a certain weariness and disillusionment set in and many people began to wonder what contribution schools and school systems could really make to the solution of these problems and the resolution of the major dilemmas implicit in their engagement. During the 1980s and especially in the 1990s, the discourse shifted from social values to economic values and to the role of the school in promoting economic skills.

In recent years we have been living through a trend which emphasizes the contribution schools should make to the economic development of society and the preparation of young people for the world of work. In these matters, the discourse has shifted from values to skills: employability skills, thinking for a living, intellectual work, the development of human resources, school-to-work transitions, and a variety of partnerships between schools and business.

Unlike an earlier era in which this concern led to the development of vocational programs in special institutions or as part of the facilities of comprehensive high schools, the new vocationalism stressed the need to keep young people in school and prevent drop-outs and the need to link academic education, technical competence and career skills. Governments warned about the bleak work prospects of high school dropouts and even of high school graduates and the need to pursue some programs of post-secondary education, especially in the high priority areas of the new service economy – mathematics, science, computers.

The effect of this on secondary schools was to raise the stakes for teachers, parents and students. Getting through high school was no longer enough; programs needed to be reformulated in terms of results, outcomes or competencies; students needed to perform, and perform well, on high-stakes tests in high-stakes subjects if they were going to succeed in the globalized Canadian economy of the 21st century. Leadership skills, teamwork, entrepreneurship, interpersonal communication, emotional literacy, problem solving, sound work habits, learning how to learn and transfer of learning from classroom to life – these were the new goals of education.

Schools are being pressed to perform, define their niche, compete, market their services, and in some cases offer guarantees for the quality of their product. In the increasingly polarized job market between good jobs and bad jobs, there is little room for the students in the middle and little patience with the schools and programs that fall between low-skills jobs in fast food and high-skills jobs in the crucial – but evidently erratic – high-tech sector.

IDENTIFYING SUCCESS

We cannot say to what extent a school is being successful until we understand what it is trying to do and how well it is doing it.

Not all schools are expected to do the same things and different groups have different ideas about what is important for a school to do. Certainly, there are common expectations: basic skills, like literacy and numeracy, general information like the organization of our government and the structure of the atom, fundamental social values like tolerance for differences and respect for authority.

But there are a lot of other things that schools do that some people consider important, more important even than test results. These are, among others: inclusion of students with learning difficulties; challenging the gifted and talented; sorting students into categories that will shape what courses they take and what learning paths they will be able to follow; encouraging young women to pursue careers in non-traditional occupations; keeping disengaged young men in school and motivating them to learn; giving young people a chance to rise above the limitations of their street, their family, their ethnic group, or their economic situation; giving young people in difficulty a second chance; welcoming newcomers and helping them become comfortable and accepted in their new society. Some criticize schools for not having a clear mission or set of priorities, for being too vague and soft-headed and romantic in their goals and visions. But perhaps they should be more criticized for being too modest, too narrow, and too pragmatic in their definitions of what they wish to do and how well they do it.

Our education system is very much influenced by American education and American society is very much influenced by sports, especially baseball. Baseball is a game of statistics, results and quantification and we want to measure, weigh, and compare students and schools. We want ranking, winners and losers, and our metaphor for a learning program is the curriculum, the course to be run. This works well for skills like athletics, electronics, computer programming, lab experiments and test writing. It does not work so well for areas of interpretation, the questioning of foreign policy, the experience of loss, the meaning of nemesis. Nor can we easily assign numbers for learning outcomes such as self-esteem, tolerance for ambiguity or dignity under stress.

Even though a school may define its success mainly in those areas in which it can measure achievement in the currency now in vogue and easily calculated, it must not miss the chance also to define its success in those areas in which assessment must be defended, not simply calculated.

TESTING AND RELATING

Formal testing, by some external agency outside of the school, is an important indicator of achievement and one that is popular especially with governments, parents and post-secondary admission officers. Testing can tell us some important things: that a student is qualified to obtain a secondary school diploma and go on to further studies; how a student's achievement compares with that of a larger population of comparable students; that a school is being successful in preparing its students in the knowledge, values and skills they will need in the future; and how a school's achievement compares with other comparable schools. Test results can provide important information for school planning and the improvement of teaching practices

In a broader sense, schools are a test for everyone. Teachers test students; students test teachers; parents test and are tested by their children and their teachers; administrators test teachers and are themselves tested by their supervisors and boards, and, of course, by their teachers and students. From time to time the media also enter into the testing business, judging schools and publishing results of surveys and official examinations.

Schools are expected to make judgments about their students. They evaluate them on the basis of their improvement (development referenced), on their basis of their control of subject matter or attainment of results (criterion referenced), and on the basis of their standing in relation to a larger population such as the grade level or students in other schools in the district (norm referenced). Testing is important in many fields – in medicine, engineering, science, manufacturing and finance. What distinguishes testing in education from testing in other fields is that there is so much of it to be done, that the costs in time, effort and money are so extensive, and that there is more subjectivity in the criteria against which students are tested and the standards against which attainment is measured.

What does it mean that a school has an average pass mark of 74.3% on a provincial examination? What does that say about the quality of the students being tested, about the school preparing them and about the assumptions, structures and expectations of the examination? What is being measured? Understanding of a novel? Mastery of a set of notes on a novel? Ability to take a test on a novel? Can we compare test results in mathematics with test results in history and get an average mark? What does this mark mean? Is there a correlation between achievement on a test and achievement in further studies and careers, or is it just with achievement on other tests, a closed system?

There is a growing reliance on testing, especially in secondary schools, to demonstrate rigor and standards and to provide objective evidence of accomplishment. Preparing for tests is an important and increasingly pervasive form of teacher-student activity and one that is more technical and utilitarian than other relationships between teachers and students. Through preschool, elementary and junior high school (or middle school) there tend to be more diverse human relations between teachers and students – more cooperative learning, more project work, more independent study, more explorative and innovative pedagogy and more varied forms of assessing different types of human learning.

But in senior high school, there seems to be a general pressure to narrow the forms of relating in teaching and learning to collaboration in the preparation for the final examinations. The stakes are too high to experiment or wander from the program or encourage too much self-directed learning, those qualities that might contribute to post-secondary learning success but not to the immediate goal of doing well on the exams.

Teaching and learning should certainly be informed and guided by test results. But they should not be driven by them.

SCHOOL AS A SYSTEM

These schools are generally large schools in large buildings. As the popularity of secondary education increased in the last century and more students were willing and able to go beyond elementary school, the large high school became the standard institution. The importance of size was reinforced with the trend to serve the needs of all students during adolescence and thus to provide a range of courses, programs and facilities to fit these needs.

There was an evolution in education from the personalized and usually small elementary schools - extensions of the family – to the more depersonalized and usually large and thus complex secondary schools. To help the transition from the one to the other, junior high schools and more recently middle schools were created, to blend the primarily student-centred culture of the elementary with the primarily subject-centred culture of the senior secondary school.

We often speak of school as a culture, but we must also look at it as a system, a complex set of interrelated structures and functions. The most powerful of these are the codes of conduct, academic regulations for admitting students into courses and sections, evaluation and certification procedures, scheduling, grouping of students into classes, organization of content, hierarchy of authority, competition, specialization of function, and the common practices of instruction. Efforts since the 1960s to analyze these structures – sometimes referred to as the hidden or implicit curriculum of the school – have compared this system to the organization of industrial enterprises on which it was modeled.

In recent decades, there have been efforts to provide an alternative model of secondary education, from so-called "free" schools, alternative schools, and alternatives to school to cyber schools and distance learning, but they have done little to challenge the industrial model of the secondary school as system. On the contrary, the reforms and restructuring of the 1990s seem to have reinforced this industrial model and made it the icon for academic rigor, high standards, seriousness of purpose, discipline and sound preparation for life.

Yet should we believe the social analysis that describes the changing structure of society and political action, and the changing workplace of entrepreneurship, team work, adaptability and self-directed learning? Should we assume that there ought to be a symmetry between the organization of schools and the organization of society and work, regardless of content? If so, then the system represented by the typical secondary school, as illustrated by the schools in this study, may be out of step with what is happening in modern society.

SCHOOL AND PEOPLE

There is little disputing the notion that a school is made up of people and that it is the people who make the school.

Some schools are made by the students. They are carefully selected, and they are competent and motivated before entering the building. It is also the students that make some of those selective programs like the International Baccalaureate, advanced math and science courses, and advanced courses in the arts and careers.

Some schools are made by the parents. They have chosen to send their children to this school and have an investment in the school's success. They will make sure their children obey the rules of the school and do the work assigned to them. They will go to parents' night, they will sit on committees, they will help raise money, they will volunteer to coach teams or work in the library or tutor children having problems. They will pass the word around to their friends and neighbors that this is a good school and real estate agents will mention it to prospective homeowners. Many private schools are made by the parents, and this is also true of some public schools that have earned a reputation among parents.

Some schools are made by the principal, a dynamic man or woman who comes to a school, galvanizes the staff, mobilizes the parents, inspires the students, provides what some have called a transformational leadership that imbues the school ethos, the curriculum, and the image of the school in the larger community. Not infrequently, this kind of charismatic person needs a good assistant principal to manage the day-to-day operations of the institution while the principal spreads vision and inspiration.

And some schools are made by the teachers, or more likely by a group of teachers since it is usually not a whole staff but a critical minority that makes a difference. These may be very different kinds of people and the differences may be the key to the school's success: the eccentric, the serious scholar, the team leader, the great communicator, the reliable worker, the moral voice, the thoughtful observer, the genius, the operator, the salesperson, the motivational organizer, the efficient planner, the creative ideas person, and the person who follows up on everyone else's great ideas. Teachers affect the school and its students in two ways, in their contribution as individuals with taste, discernment, and expertise, and as part of a team, the synergy of which distinguishes a great team or department or staff from a mediocre one.

We are happy to think about how great people can make a great school, but we are less comfortable thinking about how the wrong people can destroy a great school or prevent a good school from becoming great. These are the teachers who have seen it all before and for every new idea their reaction is "This, too, shall pass." The cynics, the lazy, the discouraged, the neurotic, the self-absorbed, the intellectually dull and the spiritually numb, the jealous and the indifferent, the agitator and the blind follower - they too can make schools what they are and keep them from becoming what they can be.

> **We are happy to think about how great people can make a great school, but we are less comfortable thinking about how the wrong people can destroy a great school or prevent a good school from becoming great.**

LEADING AND MANAGING

There is a great deal of romance surrounding the idealized role of the school principal and a great deal of piety written about what makes a good principal.

The theory of being a principal stresses the importance of leadership, the practice of being a principal stresses the importance of management, something quite different. Leadership deals with vision, motivation, marshalling of will, modeling, innovation, the big picture and communication. Management deals with organizing, follow-up, attention to detail, maintenance, continuity, tact and problem solving.

Many principals express frustration with the multiple demands of their job, including applying complex union contracts and district policies, maintaining the physical facilities, allocating resources, supervising teachers, organizing instruction, maintaining order and working with parents. In some places, policies of decentralized management have added responsibilities to the role of the principal without providing the power, resources and support needed to discharge these responsibilities.

There is growing concern in many jurisdictions about a coming shortage of qualified persons willing to assume the responsibilities of the principalship and there are various plans to improve recruitment and selection, and to provide training and support. In addition, the demographics of the profession suggest there will be a substantial increase in retirements from both teaching and administration over the next few years and it may be opportune to rethink the role of school administrators as well as their status and rewards.

It is clear that in the schools studied in this project, the school principals and their administrative staff have played a dominant role in the evolution of the schools, in some cases in its revitalization, and much of the success of these schools is due to the leadership and management skills of the principal.

Still, the question can be asked: Is it possible the importance of the principal is inversely related to the professional competence of the staff? In a stable and competent and innovative body of teachers, would much of the initiative come from individual teachers and groups of teachers? Do teachers rely too much on the principal to establish the vision, set the tone and guide the activities of the school? At least in secondary schools, are we moving out of an era of the model of the father figure of military officer or plant manager to more collegial forms of leadership, more diffusion of responsibilities and powers, as we have seen in some of these schools. Can we cultivate the leadership capacity of the whole institution - teachers and students - and internalize the dynamic and ownership of school improvement?

In the long term can leadership and management be complementary roles for an administrator or must one, usually management, dominate the other?

CHALLENGE AND CHANGE

Institutions, like individuals and societies, need challenges to remain alive and dynamic. Without challenges they slip into inertia; if the challenges become too abrupt, too frequent or too powerful, the institution may suffer, decline or even cease to function.

There is a certain irony in education institutions that on the one hand they are in the business of change, trying to change young people into mature adults, and on the other hand they are themselves often resistant to change in their goals, structures and operations. Schools seem to work better in societies and eras when change is gradual, cumulative, predictable and not too radical; they have more difficulty adjusting to changes that are rapid, discontinuous and unpredictable. In addition, quantitative changes – more students, more money, more buildings, more teachers – are more easily absorbed by systems than qualitative changes – new technology, new curricula, new standards, new research findings, new approaches to teaching and learning.

Over the past few decades, there have been major challenges and fundamental changes in many areas: government, manufacturing, services, security, health care, food production, transportation, the arts, scientific research, family, religion, communication, the media, and almost every major profession and occupation. Many businesses and whole occupations have ceased to exist, many people work today at jobs that did not exist when they were in school. Change has become a permanent feature in our society and at times change is rapid, profound and often traumatic.

Yet schools seem a striking exception to this general pattern in our society. Journalists, physicians, scientists, priests and businessmen from the 1950s are amazed at the changes in their occupations in the beginning of the 21st century, but most principals, teachers and students from the 1950s would have no trouble recognizing the schools of 2001. Courses, classes, buildings, schedules, program structure, teaching, regulations, attendance rules, and discipline all look very much the same: some differences in style, new kinds of problems, computer labs, more stress on security, but the basic assumptions and infrastructure of secondary school learning are largely unchanged.

What changes have occurred in secondary education are largely adjustments to the existing structures and philosophy, and this is surprising considering the profound discoveries on learning and how the brain functions, the availability of the Internet and its potential as a learning resource, the kinds of work secondary school students today will have to do in the future, and the economic and social challenges they will have to face.

Schooling looks calm, confident, secure and in control in a world that is none of these things. The quiet, perhaps, before the storm.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The business of medicine is not treatment but health; the business of education is not teaching but learning.

Learning is the acquisition of skills, knowledge and values; teaching is the deliberate effort to promote learning in others. In essence, learning is natural and neutral; the skills we learn may be useless or vital to our survival, the knowledge we acquire may be shallow and erroneous or profound and true; the values we adopt may be helpful to our selves and others or destructive.

If learning is neutral, teaching is exceedingly moral. Teaching sorts out skills, knowledge and values, promoting those it considers important, ignoring those it considers irrelevant and suppressing those it considers pernicious. What is good gets on the curriculum; what is bad gets banned.

We consider teaching as good when it selects good learning goals in terms of skills, knowledge and values (the realm of curriculum policy), justifies this choice (the realm of philosophy of education), and is effective in promoting learning for the most people, in the most efficient manner, with the greatest effect in terms of time, durability and transfer (the realm of pedagogy and learning theory). Teaching may be effective (in terms of methods) but irrelevant or harmful (in terms of goals), just as teaching may be admirable in goals and ineffective in terms of achieving these goals.

There are four channels to learning: direct experience and resources (internships, work, studios, labs, living); technology (books, computers, the Internet, television, writing); institutions (schools, colleges and universities, families, community centres); teachers (instructors, mentors, gurus, models, lecturers, discussion leaders). Sometimes we rely on one or a combination of these channels to learning (using a computer simulation to experience how to land an aircraft) and sometimes it is better to rely on one channel (an advanced music student working with an accomplished musician).

Our society has increasingly relied on institutionalized learning and formalized it in schools, curriculum and instruction, and accordingly we have come to place great stress on two of these channels, professional teachers and educational institutions. Our learning is usually organized by a teacher, and it is dependent on attendance at an institution for its legitimization, control and certification. Learning means attending school; the longer you attend the more you learn. Perhaps.

But the relative importance of teachers and institutions is shifting. Lifelong learning is now an necessity and increasingly a reality and this implies not more teaching and schooling but more varied learning experiences and more reliance on channels other than formal institutions. Information technology and interactive software put us into direct contact with information and experiences beyond our immediate environment, to which we would otherwise have only limited access.

This is expanding the potential of learning for young people as well as adults and presenting new challenges to the moral and discerning function of teaching.

Chapter 7 Implications

LINKS TO THE RESEARCH LITERATURE

In Chapter Two, some conclusions were drawn from the research literature about the effect of socio-economic status, the impact of schools, how schools can address social inequalities, how schools can be effective, the principles on which school improvement should be based and the dynamic nature of schools.

The major conclusions dealt with the effects of socio-economic status on academic achievement, the effect of schooling on achievement and social inequalities, and the general characteristic of effective schools.

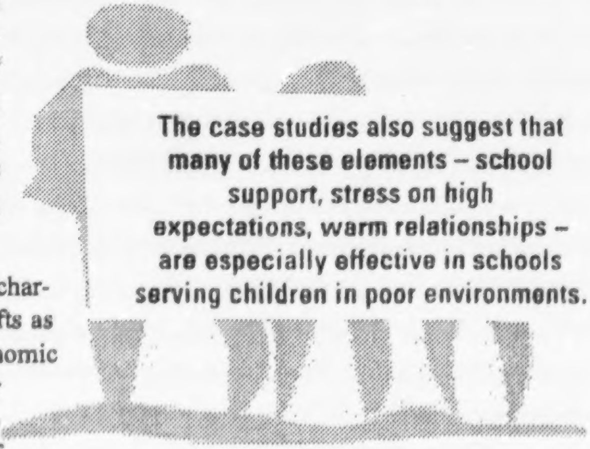
This study did not seek to measure the relative effect of socio-economic status and schooling on student achievement. The case studies do confirm the role the school can play in reducing social inequalities with a stress on clear expectations, supportive structures and services. They document the features which made these schools effective and they describe how the schools generally followed the principles in the literature on which school improvement is based.

In this sense there are no surprises or revelations coming out of the case studies. What the case studies contribute to the body of literature is a richness of detail about how these elements work together in a school to promote success, the importance of common vision joined with unified effort, and the need for vigilance if the school is to continue to progress and serve its students well.

The case studies confirm the role the school can play in reducing social inequalities with a stress on clear expectations, supportive structures and services. They document the features which made these schools effective and describe how the schools generally followed the principles in the literature on which school improvement is based.

The case studies also suggest that many of these elements – school support, stress on high expectations, warm relationships – are especially effective in schools serving children in poor environments, those in communities where there is ongoing violence or the threat of violence, and in situations where the cultural and linguistic tradition of families differs from that of the society. For such students, the school makes a difference and an important one, beyond the importance of other schools where there are many sources of support, ambition and guidance.

These case studies underline the dynamic character of modern, urban schools – their shifts as they respond to new demographic, economic and cultural pressures within the larger organizational structure of public education. There are times when a couple of years can make a big difference in the life of a school because of a new program, a new principal, the loss of key personnel or new kinds of students.



The case studies also suggest that many of these elements – school support, stress on high expectations, warm relationships – are especially effective in schools serving children in poor environments.

LINKS TO THE QUESTIONS

At the beginning of the study three research questions were proposed:

1. Are there common characteristics of low-income schools?
2. What characteristics and activities distinguish successful low-income schools from less successful low-income schools?
3. What are the implications for policy and practice?

There do not seem to be clear and distinguishing characteristics of low-income schools nor are there stark differences between the low-income schools in the study and other descriptions of schools. The differences are of degree, not kind. Low-income schools are often in neighborhoods with a good deal of violence and they are more preoccupied with security than some other schools, but security concerns are becoming an issue everywhere.

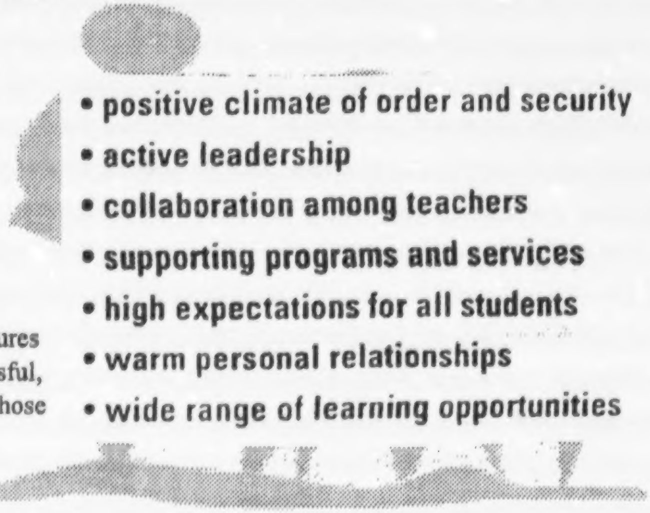
Most of the schools in the study are multi-ethnic but that is also true of many other schools in high-income areas, including private schools. There is less parental support in these schools, more reliance on the staff of the school to "get on with the job." In their organization and institutional culture, low-income schools do not differ dramatically from schools in other areas of the school districts, or at least little difference was noted by those associated with the school. In brief, it may be misleading to stereotype low-income schools as a category; the differences among them may be greater than the differences between them and other schools.

It would be too simple and misleading to give a list of characteristics that identify successful low-income schools and distinguish them from less successful ones.

First, the study found it unhelpful to divide the set into successful and unsuccessful schools, but rather saw the schools on a continuum on the basis of success and efforts to improve.

Second, schools had many definitions of success and some were more successful in one dimension than another. Examples of outcome measures important to these schools include the social integration of immigrants, results on examinations, sense of security in the school, support for personal and academic problems, providing a second chance to students, and tolerance and respect among students and teachers.

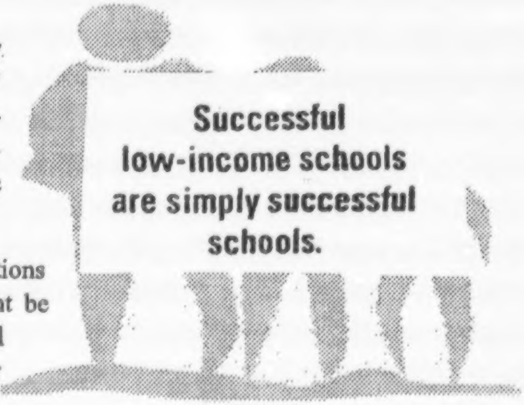
Third, insofar as there were features that marked these schools as successful, these features do not differ from those described in the general literature of effective schools. These are a positive climate of order and security, active leadership, collaboration among teachers, supporting programs and services, high expectations for performance, behavior and achievement for all students, warm personal relationships between educators and students and a wide range of learning opportunities and resources for all students.



- **positive climate of order and security**
- **active leadership**
- **collaboration among teachers**
- **supporting programs and services**
- **high expectations for all students**
- **warm personal relationships**
- **wide range of learning opportunities**

Successful low-income schools are simply successful schools. They are 'no excuses' schools which have accepted the responsibility to create high achievement for all students, irrespective of their socio-economic backgrounds.

The third question is related to the implications for policy and practice. What steps might be taken to increase the potential for all schools everywhere to make a difference for their students?



Successful low-income schools are simply successful schools.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

1. Commitment to success for all students

Governments, school districts, teachers' unions and school communities should commit themselves to the goal of success for all students in obtaining a secondary education diploma or equivalent.

They should commit themselves to policies, resources and collaboration to ensure this goal. This goal is essential in the modern world in which to lack a secondary diploma is to be marginalized economically and socially. The goal implies three elements: (1) a multi-faceted concept of academic secondary school success (including literacy and social skills, general knowledge and core values); (2) a diversity of programs to prevent failure and provide alternative pathways; (3) interventions and supports to renew schools that are struggling.

2. Relevance of learning

Schools should make serious efforts to improve the relevance of learning and demonstrate this relevance to all students, especially those from poor and marginalized environments and from ethnic groups that may not understand the relevance of secondary education.

This demonstration of relevance must touch three elements: (1) relevance of results on examinations and the need to excel; (2) relevance in programs that connect content with both current society and the cultural and social background of students; (3) relevance in teaching that links learning to contexts beyond school, in the environment, society and the experiences and cultural traditions of the students. Students learn when they are engaged and they are challenged when what they learn is relevant to their lives.

3. Leadership in the institution

Principals should see their primary responsibility as fostering leadership beyond their office, in the teaching staff and students.

Leadership that is personalized in one role and that is not institutionalized is fragile. Leaders in schools must work together for the common good of students and be vigilant that the school continues to improve.

4. Areas of excellence

Every school needs one or more areas of excellence, sources of special pride and achievement, that will vitalize other areas of the life of the school.

These areas may be programs like an International Baccalaureate or special centres to teach the language of instruction, they may be exemplary programs in performance fine arts, they may be a special clientele of students (those with learning difficulties or the deaf), or they may be extra-curricular activities such as athletics or cultural events like drama or crafts. Without such enlivening influences, a school can become the bland leading the bland; with them, school choice has meaning.

5. Balance of learning opportunities

Schools in low-income areas must offer a range of courses, programs, activities and services to provide students with a balance between challenge and ability, between academic and *career programs, between theory and practical experience, and between curricular and extra-curricular programs.*

These schools need to provide a range of challenges to their students since many kinds of challenges are not available in the communities in which they live. No school should provide an exclusively academic program without also having career-related options. In these schools, the distinction between curricular and extra-curricular activities blurs as the importance of the latter to reinforce the former is greater than in other schools. The whole of student life in school must be considered as a unity, a field for engaging students in learning and development.

6. Integration of effort

In order to be successful and effective, a school must have unity of purpose combined with a unity of effort, linking knowledge, data, analysis, planning, mission, expectations, results, processes, support, resources and implementation.

A good school has a unity of purpose, not simply a vague philosophical wish list but a well-considered base of information on accomplishments and problems, serious reflection, and a plan of action. If school is a community, school improvement is a community project, requiring not only will but also intelligence and patience. Innovation must be based on information – data collection and research – and school practices need to be linked clearly to past achievement and future expectations.

7. Teachers as professionals

Schools need to have the freedom to analyze their needs and select their teachers, establish priorities for professional development, ensure their intelligent assignment of responsibilities, guarantee that they are available to students, and provide them with the support they need to do their job.

It is necessary that professional development activities, new ideas and research on learning find their way into classroom practices if the intellectual foundation of teaching practice, and of the teaching profession, is to be improved. As school needs and expectations change, teachers have to acquire new skills and often a higher degree of flexibility. This implies the involvement of the teaching staff in policy decisions and school improvement teams, as well as the support of administrators for teachers assuming new kinds of responsibilities to serve their students. These are important for the collective professionalization of teachers.

8. Extensions beyond the school

Schools have the responsibility to extend themselves in two ways: expand access to learning through information technology and expand the learning opportunities of their students through involvement in the community.

Schools, especially those in challenging situations, must become open learning environments, using technology to improve the learning opportunities of their students and to provide their services to those who cannot attend in person. They must also expand their reach into their communities - many of which are in dire need of the vitalization the school can provide - and giving their students learning experiences in the real world.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

1. How can we measure areas of success in a school in a comprehensive way, situating examination results in a broader context?
2. What happens to students from these low-income schools after they graduate from secondary school and go on to post-secondary education and careers?
3. How do results in tests correlate with future success?
4. How do low-income students perform in non-traditional schools such as cyber-schools and alternative schools?
5. What professional development practices have the most effect on classroom activities and student performance?
6. What will these schools look like in five years?

Appendix

BACKGROUND

In 1999, the Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education (SAEE), with funding from the Max Bell Foundation, commissioned a study to compare high-achieving and low-achieving secondary schools in Canada which were serving lower income status students. The purpose of the study was to determine if there were differences in the characteristics and practices of these schools and to identify practices that seemed to contribute to high learning achievement. It has been the intent of the project that, arising from the studies of these schools, would come implications for policy and practice related to improving schools in low-income environments.

The design included a selection process based on quantitative data obtained from Statistics Canada and provincial Ministries of Education and a research procedure involving visits and interviews and the preparation of case studies.

During 1999 and 2000, work was done on the selection of schools, a research team was formed, and a literature review was prepared and published. Twelve secondary schools were selected, four in Quebec, four in Alberta and four in British Columbia. In 2000 and 2001, researchers visited the schools, made observations, held interviews and studied school documents. A case study was prepared for each school and a final report presented the set of schools and analyzed patterns and trends.

RESEARCH TEAM

The research team was composed of the following persons:

Terrence Wendel, Wendel and Associates Consulting Inc., Edmonton (literature review, principal investigator 1999-2000)

Neal Muhtadi, Deputy Superintendent, Abbotsford School District (BC case studies)

Alex Gardner, Retired Associate Superintendent, Edmonton Public School Board (Alberta case studies)

Muriel Dunnigan, Retired Associate Superintendent, Edmonton Catholic School District (Alberta case studies)

Claude Lessard, Professeur titulaire, Faculté des sciences de l'éducation, Université de Montréal (Quebec case studies)

Claudio Violato, Professor, Division of Applied Psychology, University of Calgary (site selection and qualitative analysis)

Norman Henchey, Emeritus professor of education, McGill University, (principal author of the final report)

Helen Raham, Executive Director, Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education, (project coordinator)

The research team was also supported by the following researchers:

In British Columbia: Lindsay Sealey, Bruce Kiloh, Patty Kiloh, Jim Haigh, Kirsten Houghen, Karen Bowater

In Quebec: Louis Lavasseur, Claude Magnan, Lucie Lalancette, and professors Nicole Carignan (Université du Québec à Montréal) and Marcienne Levesque (Université de Montréal)

In addition, there was a Research Advisory Panel composed of the following:

Peter Coleman, Professor, Faculty of Education, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C.

Brian Caldwell, Dean, Faculty of Education, Melbourne University, Melbourne, Australia

Michael Fullan, Dean, Faculty of Education, OISE, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario

SELECTION OF SCHOOLS

The following criteria were used for the selection of secondary schools: province, low-income status, high or low academic performance, urban school district(s), suitability and special circumstances of the school, and agreement of district and school communities

Three provinces were selected for study because they had government examinations at the end of secondary school and data were available on the performance of schools and on the postal codes of the student populations. These provinces were Quebec, Alberta and British Columbia.

Urban school districts were defined as follows: a French-language district in Montreal, an urban district in Alberta, and several urban districts on the lower mainland in British Columbia.

The selection on the basis of socio-economic status and academic performance was done on the basis of a study by Claudio Violato.[7]

Socio-economic data were obtained through the following sources:

1. Enrolment by postal code for all schools with Grade 12 enrolment of more than 14 in 1998 for Alberta and B.C. Enrolment by postal code for all schools with Grade 11 enrolment of more than 14 in 1999 for Quebec.

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[7] Violato, Claudio (2000) Report on School Selection: *Schools That Make a Difference.* Kelowna, BC: Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education.

2. Links between postal codes and enumeration areas for school enrolments provided by Statistics Canada using the Postal Code Conversion File May 1999 and 1996 Census data.

Student achievement data on provincial examinations were obtained from the three Ministries of Education. The base years were 1999-2000 in Quebec, 1998-1999 in Alberta, and 1997-98 in British Columbia.

After examining the results, two measures were selected: for socio-economic status, "Family Income from All Sources" and for academic achievement, "Mean Provincial Examination Mark".

Low income, high achievement and low-achievement were defined in the following way:

Table A-1 Income and Achievement Definitions

	Low Income Family Income	High Achievement	Low Achievement
Quebec	Below 30th %ile	Above 62nd %ile	Below 12th %ile
Alberta	Below 45th %ile	Above 50th %ile	Below 38th %ile
BC	Below 30th %ile	Above 72nd %ile	Below 12th %ile

Source: Violato (2000), Figures 2, 3, and 4.

On the basis of this information, 4 high-achievement schools and two low-achievement schools were selected for each province.

Although the initial site selection was based strictly on provincial score data and socio-economic data, the school jurisdictions provided additional data that served to inform the final selection process. These included such information as attendance, mobility rates, satisfaction data from parents, students, and teachers, student disciplinary summary reports, and other measures of success such as student awards. Secondary schools that were atypical in program and population, or designated as alternative schools, were eliminated. In addition, consideration was given to contextual information and the recent history of the selected schools that had a bearing on the wisdom of involving the site in the study (e.g., change of principal or implementation of a new program). Selection was also dependent, of course, on the willingness of the school to participate (See Violato, page 18).

The final selection of schools is summarized in Table A-2. All 12 schools fit the definition of low income. One Alberta school did not fit the achievement pattern but was retained to complete the sample of 12 schools. Furthermore, one school in British Columbia was a higher achieving school than expected because it had recently been changed from a junior high school to a full high school.

As a result, the sample represents a less clearly defined contrast between high and low achieving schools than had originally been intended. This continuum of achievement became even more apparent as the researchers studied the schools and followed their evolution over time.

Table A-2: Final School Selection

	Family Income	% ile	Average Mark	% ile
Que.				
1	32,634	14	76.4	68
2	29,311	10	78.0	78
3	23,669	7	62.3	19
4	37,651	19	77.1	72
Alta.				
5	44,339	13	62.4	37
6	45,512	22	61.4	33
7	52,712	42	67.8	82
8	53,220	44	64.8	58
B.C.				
9	49,970	26	70.0	73
10	51,817	30	70.1	73
11	49,720	25	70.4	76
12	48,521	22	57.9	2

PROCEDURE

After the initial selection was complete and approvals had been obtained from the school districts and the schools, meetings were held with district personnel and with school staff, students and parents to explain the purpose of the project, what was involved, and the procedures for involving the school community.

The ethical guidelines for the project stressed the following elements:

1. Informed consent and parental permission were required
2. Anonymity for all schools and persons participating in the study was assured
3. No individual information would be included in the reports
4. Discussion would take place with schools to ensure accuracy and fairness
5. An opportunity for schools to provide case study addendum if they wish
6. School and district policies and procedures would be respected
7. On-site research in schools would be minimally intrusive.

Researchers visited the schools over a period of 6 to 18 months, spending on average seventeen full days observing classes and interviewing administrators, teachers, students and parents in each school. They also studied district and school documents such as policy statements, mission statements, codes of conduct, organizational documents and reports prepared by the school addressed to the district and to the community. Cross-site visits were arranged to enable researchers working in one province to visit schools in at least one other province. The researchers prepared case studies on each school, using a common framework (see Table A-3) and obtained feedback from the school. These were assembled in a single document.[8]

The researchers participated in the preparation of the final report summarizing the project and exploring patterns, trends and implications arising from the study.

Table A-3: Framework for the Case Studies

	Content
1	Profile, Evidence of the School's Success, Recent History, Community Served, Characteristics of the Student Body
2	Climate, Characteristics of the School, Size, Organization, Distinguishing Features
3	Leadership of Principal and Teachers, and in the Community
4	Staff Characteristics and Organization
5	Focus on Ongoing Growth, Innovation, Response to Challenges
6	Instructional Organization, Teaching Approaches, Services to Students, Special Programs, Planning and Strategies
7	Links with Parents and Community
8	Observations, Conclusions, and Elements of Success

REPORTS

The project has produced the following reports: a literature survey (Wendel, 2000), a study of school selection (Violato, 2000), a collection of case studies (Dunnigan and others, 2001) and an integrating final report (Henchey and others, 2001).

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8. Dunnigan , M., Gardner, A., Lessard, C., and Muhtadi, N. (2001). *Twelve Secondary Schools in Low-Income Settings.* Kelowna, BC: Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education.

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